Practices of Mediation and Phenomena of Contamination in the Films of M. Antonioni and A. Egoyan

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Signature: Giulia Baso
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Translations

Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Italian are mine.
Abstract

By bringing M. Antonioni and A. Egoyan into dialogue with one another, this thesis sheds light on a significant yet neglected aspect of their cinematic visions: the interactions of practices of technological mediation with phenomena of contamination and dissolution of boundaries. My work is inspired by the recovery of archival material that demonstrates the two auteurs’ intention to collaborate on a filmmaking project, entitled Just to Be Together, between 1997 and 1998. This unfinished film invites us to look retrospectively at Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s oeuvres in a way that transcends established frameworks of analysis based on national, art-house, and diasporic/exilic paradigms.

Focusing on what came before this suspended artistic collaboration, the present study proceeds through a series of paired readings of films, framed within a theoretical context of transnational cinema. The final section includes an expanded, intertextual discussion of the major findings of my research in relation to the screenplay of Just to Be Together. Whilst recognising the directors’ different cultural and historical backgrounds, I argue that there exist strong thematic and stylistic affinities between Antonioni’s ‘art-house’ cinema and Egoyan’s ‘accented’ aesthetics. The corpus I have chosen to concentrate on reflects my view that such similarities are most noticeable in Antonioni’s first colour films and Egoyan’s early features. In particular, the following films are examined in pairs: Il deserto rosso (1964) / The Adjuster (1991) (Chapter One, ‘Reconfiguring Modernity’); Blow-up (1966) / Speaking Parts (1989) (Chapter Two, ‘Capturing What Vanishes’); The Passenger (1974) / Next of Kin (1984) (Chapter Three, ‘Discarding the Unwanted Skin’).

By using different conceptual frameworks developed by scholars such as Zygmunt Bauman, Julia Kristeva, Rosi Braidotti, Roland Barthes, and Richard Dyer, this study explores themes of fluidity, ambivalence, renegotiation of bodily boundaries, media technologies, pollution, and identity. It aims to engage with recent critical efforts to rethink Antonioni’s aesthetics from the perspective of contemporary theoretical frames, whilst opening up a discursive space from which to challenge the validity of diasporic and accented models for Egoyan’s early features.
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Introduction

Antonioni today powerfully escapes the reach of old categorisations that have attempted to congeal his figure once and for all into an inert monument of modern cinema. His continued influence on world film-makers and the new pressing questions that his films raise today for contemporary audiences call for a renewed critical effort.

Laura Rascaroli and John David Rhodes

Looking back at the work of Michelangelo Antonioni today, from the perspective of the twenty-first century, one might feel that everything has already been said or written about the director of ‘alienation’. Yet recent instances of film criticism have powerfully demonstrated that his cinema is more alive than ever, and continues to pose pressing questions to contemporary audiences. This thesis aims to bring to the surface one neglected trajectory of Antonioni’s transnational artistic legacy: the connection with Canadian director Atom Egoyan. Through a series of paired readings of films, it draws together two major filmmakers in a way that sheds new light upon their oeuvres.

Antonioni lends himself to national (Italian), art-house, and modernist paradigms of analysis. His cinema is commonly seen as bearing the mark of a European auteur tradition. Egoyan can be variously claimed as a national (Canadian), diasporic/exilic, accented, and mainstream director. My dissertation is informed to some degree by all of these critical perspectives; one of its purposes, however, will be to unsettle dominant assumptions about how Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s films should be read. In order to do so, it attempts to trace the contours of Egoyan’s artistic indebtedness to European art cinema, whilst bringing Antonioni’s oeuvre into dialogue with key conceptual models for understanding late-modernity. Without negating the directors’ different temporal, geographical, and cultural contexts, the present study argues that there exists a strong affinity between their cinematic visions. The corpus I decided to focus on reflects my view that such similarities are most noticeable in Antonioni’s first colour films and Egoyan’s early features. More specifically, the following filmic

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The first chapter, ‘Reconfiguring Modernity’, explores the historical resonances of *Il deserto rosso* and *The Adjuster*, with particular attention given to Italy’s economic miracle of the late 1950s and early 1960s. After having outlined the role of actresses Monica Vitti and Arsinée Khanjian, my discussion engages with discourses on objects, waste, and perceptual indeterminacy through reflections on the directors’ expressive use of cinematography. It is concerned with demonstrating how the two films reconfigure aspects of the modern condition against a backdrop of globalisation and fluidity. Chapter Two, ‘Capturing What Vanishes’, argues that processes of renegotiation of boundaries are central to both Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s configurations of media technologies. Drawing a parallel between modes of proliferation of photography in the 1960s and video technology in the 1980s, it examines how the dismantlement of integrity in *Blow-Up* and *Speaking Parts* unfolds on two intertwined levels – body and image. Such an approach will allow me to discuss motifs of clothing, organ transplantation, ghostliness, and decomposition. The third and final chapter is titled ‘Discarding the Unwanted Skin’. The focus here shifts from the skin-like surfaces of clothing and images to the skin of the body, its colour, and cultural resonances. My filmic analysis of *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin* tackles issues of nomadic subjectivity, untranslated foreign languages, historical and spatial displacement, and desires for contamination, whilst also calling attention to the imagery of food ingestion in Egoyan’s first feature. Chapter Three aims to show that these paired films engage with spatiality and camera movement in very similar ways, and that they establish a clear link between media technologies of reproduction and the contamination of identity categories.

What prompted me to look at Antonioni and Egoyan in a comparative fashion is also the existence of a filmmaking project, provisionally entitled *Just to Be Together*, on which they should have collaborated between 1997 and 1998. Preliminary activities had already begun when it was dropped due to lack of financing.² This potential collaboration serves as a point of departure for my

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analysis, which aims to shed light on the significant yet overlooked connections between Antonioni’s ‘art-house’ films and Egoyan’s ‘diasporic’ cinema, and in particular to uncover the way the technological imagery in their films is used to reconfigure and renegotiate our experiences of modernity and its associated viewing practices. Even though the body of work that precedes the suspended project constitutes the main focus of my research, in the Conclusion I will illustrate and revise my findings also in the light of the screenplay of Just to Be Together. In doing so, I wish to emphasise the way in which the unfinished film has elicited an interest in the common perspective that these directors share, and which has received only limited critical attention. By mapping out the reciprocal intersections and divergences between Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s oeuvres, I will gain a better understanding of what led the two auteurs to embark upon a collaborative project that, albeit incomplete, involved a deliberately chosen fusion of their artistic and authorial identities.

The mid-1990s can be said to represent a challenge without precedent in Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s careers, although under different circumstances. At the time when Just to Be Together was taking shape, both directors were undergoing a process of artistic rediscovery that involved negotiating between opposing forces of continuity and change. Having suffered a serious stroke in 1985, Antonioni’s health issues and inability to speak made it difficult for him to shoot the many films he was still thinking about making. Insurers insisted on the presence of a back-up director; for the shooting of Beyond the Clouds (1995), he relied on Wim Wenders in a similar role (see the Conclusion). Following Exotica (1994), his critically acknowledged breakthrough film, Egoyan began to alternate original stories with literary adaptations. The reason for turning to materials written by others, as the director explains, is that he felt he had reached an impasse with his own fictional world: ‘I felt that I’d exhausted everything I had to say and all the characters I could invent at that point.’ The critical and commercial success of The Sweet Hereafter (1997) is indicative of a shift in Egoyan’s cinematic practice: away from the detachment of his early work and towards a more accessible narrative style. Acclaimed by audiences and critics alike, The Sweet Hereafter won three prizes at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival, inaugurating a new phase in the director’s increasingly transnational

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trajectory. Recently, David L. Pike has highlighted how the formal turn of the post-Exotica period echoes the passage from small to large-scale productions, and thereby from a context of local, independent cinema to one that transcends national boundaries, and must be viable in the global commercial marketplace.\(^4\) It might be argued that, to a certain degree, this shift is paralleled by Antonioni’s English-language films that follow the so-called ‘trilogy’ of the early 1960s and the subsequent Il deserto rosso: Blow-Up; Zabriskie Point; and The Passenger. Considering that they include a cast of non-Italian actors, and imply hybridity in terms of languages, settings, and financing, they could be similarly regarded as instances of a transnational filmic practice.

It has long been a subject of debate among critics and reviewers whether the post-Exotica period constitutes part of an auteurist continuum, or whether it demonstrates just the opposite – namely, the inadequacy of auteurist approaches to elucidate this sudden transformation in Egoyan’s oeuvre.\(^5\) Even if the paradigm of auteur cinema implicitly applies to my comparative analysis, a detailed account of debates around film authorship is beyond the scope of the present study.\(^6\) It is important to note, however, that Egoyan’s status as an auteur has already received sustained critical attention and implicit legitimation. In the introduction to their monograph, Monique Tschofen and Jennifer Burwell write that: ‘Egoyan is widely hailed as a true auteur – someone carrying on the legacy of the European art-house traditions of Bergman, Godard, and Truffaut.’ His work, they continue, ‘bears a most recognizable signature – there is no confusing an Egoyan work with anyone else’s.’\(^7\) I also wish to draw attention to the fact that the director’s most cited models – which include Pier Paolo Pasolini, Antonioni, Reiner Werner Fassbinder, Ingmar Bergman, Alain Resnais, and Robert Bresson – show evidence of a strong connection with a

\(^4\) David L. Pike, ‘The Death of the Author? The Case of Atom Egoyan’, in Canadian Cinema Since the 1980s: At the Heart of the World (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), pp. 204-226 (pp. 223-226). As Pike reminds us, Egoyan’s artistic production has always been very diversified. The director has never stopped experimenting with video installations, opera works, and documentaries that were distributed outside mainstream film circuits.

\(^5\) Pike, pp. 204-226 (pp. 204-205).

\(^6\) For a thorough discussion of these topics, see David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger, eds., Authorship and Film (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Virginia Wright Wexman, ed., Film and Authorship (New Brunswick, NJ; London: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

European art-house tradition of auteurs. In an interview he gave to Jason Wood in 1998, Egoyan mentioned Antonioni and other Italian filmmakers among his primary influences, alluding to the suspended project itself:

I also had a close contact over the last year with Michelangelo Antonioni because I was supposed to be back-up director on his new project. No matter who that person is one can’t forget the enduring effect that their work has had on us, and how it inspires us to be who we are.

In another interview, quoted by Tom McSorley, Egoyan claims to be an admirer of Antonioni’s cinema and comments: ‘I love the way Antonioni would construct space in the frame and how he places the characters in peculiar, expressive spatial configurations in relation to one another.’

Jonathan Romney observes that the ‘unusual degree of what one might call auteur coherence’ in Egoyan’s work is partly derived from his continued collaboration with the same crew (editor Susan Shipton; composer Mychael Danna; sound designer Steven Munro; director of photography Paul Sarossy; and production designer Linda Del Rosario), as well as actors (Khanjian; Gabrielle Rose; David Hemblen; Elias Koteas; and many others).

In bringing Antonioni and Egoyan into dialogue with one another, this thesis engages with transnational approaches in film studies. Recent scholarship has proposed several methodological frameworks that resist the tendency to maintain rigid boundaries between nations and cultures, embracing concepts like multiculturalism or hybridity, and responding to the emergence of an increasingly interconnected world in which cultural products travel easily across national borders. One of the most influential of such theoretical models is that of Andrew Higson. His essay ‘The Instability of the National’ troubles

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10 Quoted in Tom McSorley, Atom Egoyan’s The Adjuster (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 99. As Emma Wilson has suggested, Khanjian’s roles in a number of European films – including Irma Vep (Olivier Assayas, 1996); Fin août, début septembre (Olivier Assayas, 1998); Code inconnu (Michael Haneke, 2000); À ma soeur! (Catherine Breillat, 2001); and La masseria delle allodole (Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, 2007) – further substantiate the connections between Egoyan’s universe and European cinema. See Emma Wilson, Atom Egoyan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), p. 5.

11 Romney, p. 9.
configurations of national cinema by revealing their contingency and fragility. It interrogates the limitations of the concept of ‘indigenous cultural tradition’, and calls for an understanding of images of heterogeneity in 1980s and 1990s British films through a post-national lens: ‘[i]s the national heritage ever really ‘pure’, or is it always to some extent a cultural collage, an amalgam of overlapping and sometimes antagonistic traditions, a mix of ingredients from different sources?’\textsuperscript{12}

In using the term ‘transnational’, however, my intent is not merely to indicate a process of artistic collaboration that transgresses the boundaries of Italy and Canada. Rather, I attempt to evaluate the formal and thematic implications that this potential collaboration could have. This will enable me to engage in a dialogue with contemporary critical literature on Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s cinemas. More specifically, I propose to revisit some of Antonioni’s most iconic films on the basis of anti-essentialist positions that undermine the certainties of stable identities and fixed demarcations. By arguing that his images register concerns that can be associated with paradigms of late-modernity, or that they envisage typically posthuman scenarios of renegotiation of bodily boundaries, I wish to uncover the prescient contribution of Antonioni’s artistic discourse to current debates around the modern condition. The Italian auteur’s cinematic legacy – the influence and impact that his language had on filmmakers from all over the world – offers many vantage points from which to rethink Egoyan’s early films. Most crucially, I will try to identify the drawbacks of critical approaches that locate his work in a global context of ‘exilic’ or ‘diasporic’ filmmaking. Recently, models such as ‘accented cinema’, developed in the postcolonial film theories of Hamid Naficy,\textsuperscript{13} or ‘intercultural cinema’, formulated by Laura U. Marks, have been introduced to designate a kind of cinematic practice that is perceived as alternative, hybrid, and interstitial.\textsuperscript{14} These categories of analysis are constructed in opposition to the hegemony of mainstream Hollywood cinema, and applied to exilic or diasporic filmmakers working in Western cosmopolitan countries.

Egoyan’s family has a diasporic history. His sensibility can be considered post-exilic inasmuch as it interrogates various experiences of Armenianness, and is concerned with representing, whether directly or indirectly, the tragic past of the Armenian people (Chapter Three contains a more detailed discussion of these topics). A considerable body of critical work has focused on this element of Egoyan’s aesthetics, suggesting that its recurrent images of absence, loss, separation, and dissociation are deeply rooted in the director’s post-exilic condition.\(^{15}\) This thesis adopts a perspective of transnationalism in film studies as a means of understanding the neglected cross-cultural interactions of Egoyan’s cinema with a tradition of European art-house filmmaking. Moreover, via the example of Egoyan, it hints at the limitations of the accented model, proposing that it betrays forms of theoretical determinism.

Naficy’s view has been challenged by recent scholarship on transnational cinema. Scholars Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim led us to reconfigure both Marks’s and Naficy’s approaches, questioning the assumption that the location of diasporic cinema is always confined to the liminal and the interstitial, and arguing instead that ‘diasporic cinema, while transgressing and transcending national boundaries, also has the potential of occupying or influencing the mainstream in national and transnational cinematic spaces.’\(^{16}\) Although the latest developments in Egoyan’s career are not taken into account in this thesis, films such as *Chloe* (2009), *Devil’s Knot* (2013), or, most recently, *The Captive* (2014) signal his shift towards Hollywood-style aesthetics, further complicating Naficy’s paradigm, and raising issues that future research will hopefully address. The boundary between accented and un-accented filmmakers, therefore, appears blurred and unstable; liminal and diasporic films are not only ‘contaminated’ by art-house cinema – they can also reach mainstream audiences. (With regard to this, it could be maintained that Egoyan’s career path resembles that of other established directors such as Ang Lee, Merzak Allouache, or Gurinder Chadha.)\(^{17}\)


\(^{16}\) Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, ‘Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies’, *Transnational Cinemas*, 1.1 (2010), 7-21 (p. 10).

The present study is concerned with how Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s cinemas articulate – on both thematic and stylistic levels – the interweaving of practices of mediation and phenomena of contamination. Many of their films suggest, through visual and narrative strategies, a certain anxiety about a condition of separateness and loss. Several central characters, such as Giuliana in *Il deserto rosso* or Lisa in *Speaking Parts*, are marked by their desire to reach out to others and regain the human touch they crave. Most crucially, the ways Antonioni and Egoyan frame their subjects bespeak absence of tactile contact and lack of real interaction – not only between people, but also between people and the environment, or between people and objects. The concept of ‘mediation’ that I will use in this thesis originates from here: it responds to the urge to overcome a state of separateness inherent in the modern condition. Mediation, therefore, comes to signify not only scenarios in which technology filters people’s perception of reality and intervenes in human practices or experiences, but also deeper underlying motives and emotional needs. Significantly, in the individualised milieu of *Il deserto rosso*, the child conjures up a pre-birth condition of plenitude as he shows that he can place one drop of liquid on another so that it still equals one. Acts of mediation may take different shapes, yet most of the times they denote a yearning for contact in the face of loneliness and traumatic loss.

While sexuality generally fails to provide Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s characters with real intimacy, many of them show an excessive personal or erotic investment in modern media technologies. Thomas in *Blow-Up* and Bubba in *The Adjuster* are only two possible examples, their obsession with photography being, first of all, a search for real presence and contact, which leads to an even greater loss of materiality. Critical literature has often associated the term ‘mediation’ in its visual and technological variants with Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s oeuvre. The particularity of my approach can be thus summarised as follows. First of all, I have expanded my understanding of mediating strategies so as to include other scenarios besides that of the visual. The chemical industry, for example, brings about major changes to the external world. Its mediating action between people and landscape will be addressed in Chapter One, with regard to Antonioni’s *Il deserto rosso*. The imagery of
clothing in *Blow-Up* and that of organ transplantation in *Speaking Parts* will also be discussed as strategies of mediation in Chapter Two. Clothes determine how the body appears and have a signifying potential. In Egoyan’s narrative, transplantation is a metaphor for unfulfilled desires for reciprocity and touch. The directors’ resistance to translation in *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin* will be read as an attempt to bring to the fore practices of linguistic mediation in Chapter Three. Indebted to the theories of Marshall McLuhan, such a perspective will highlight aspects of continuity between different phases of media developments. It will allow me to interrogate acts of mediation in various guises – linguistic, medical, industrial, or cinematographic – and in both narrative and formalist terms. Intimacy is always negotiated, mediated: not only by our use of modern visual technologies, but also by gestures, languages, and ways of dressing.

Antonioni and Egoyan are both concerned with the issue of whether the modern media are bearing reliable emotional messages, or distancing us from each other. The specificity of my analysis emerges also in relation to themes of contamination, which have never been discussed alongside topics of technological mediation for these two directors. Generally speaking, technological mediation tends to be perceived as a neutral practice. Contamination, by contrast, evokes images of contact, spreading, and breakdown of boundaries. Our cameras and video recording devices create a non-tactile proximity; they suggest control and intensify the objectification inherent in the act of viewing. To talk about themes of contamination in this context may seem, at first, contradictory. Yet the new technologies have proliferated, becoming more and more intimate in our lives, to such an extent that concepts of privacy and intimacy have themselves been altered. In considering acts of mediation as practices that are neither neutral nor impartial, this thesis will attempt to shed light on the scenarios of contamination, waste, and renegotiation of boundaries they can generate.

Pollution makes itself apparent in many ways: deteriorated landscapes; residues of toxic industrial chemicals; infectious diseases; ambivalence and resistance to ordering strategies; (re)production of abjection; uncontrollable spreading of sadistic pornography; experiences of ghostliness; anamorphous abstraction; and decomposition. The process of filmmaking can produce debris, too, and the unrealised *Just to Be Together* is an example of this. At the same
time, images of contamination can be productively used to describe the disruption of ideas of ‘purity’ that, in the corpus chosen for this study, can be traced across a variety of contexts. This approach will allow me to emphasise the aspects of Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s languages that transcend essentialist ideologies and binary thinking about ethnicity, nation, gender, and technology. Their cinemas, as I aim to demonstrate, testify to the leakiness and porosity of the boundaries between reality and representation; nature and culture; human and technological; and self and non-self.

Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of ambivalence and Julia Kristeva’s theory on abjection inform the conceptual framework of contamination that will guide my research. Further important references that will prove useful to revisit the imagery of bodily boundaries in Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s films are the models of posthumanism formulated by Rosi Braidotti and Donna J. Haraway. Last, but not least, it is essential to underline that, although metaphors of infectiousness have threatening overtones, phenomena of contamination will not assume an intrinsically negative value in my study. The point I want to make, in fact, is that this unresolved sense of ambivalence or defilement can also be empowering, insofar as it valorises interstitiality, and reveals the instability of our clearly defined categories of identity. This concept is present in all chapters, but particularly in Chapter Three. The worlds Antonioni and Egoyan depict typically lack contact – between human beings, but also between human beings and the physical environment. There are, however, moments of positive mediation: they imply openness rather than closure, acceptance of vulnerability rather than withdrawal from others. It is in such moments that the characters’ protective rituals and obsessions are broken down, and mediation finally succeeds in overcoming separateness.

As previously outlined, Egoyan acknowledged his debt to Antonioni’s cinematic language on more than one occasion. In light of this, the research questions I will address are the following: how are these thematic and stylistic affinities reflected in Egoyan’s early films? Does the selected corpus display a common concern with issues of technological mediation? Can we relate these processes to the phenomena of contamination and renegotiation of boundaries that these films similarly articulate? How do Antonioni and Egoyan reconfigure modernity and its associated viewing/technological practices? Can this comparative reading be used to unsettle dominant discourses on the two
directors? These questions will allow me to engage with recent critical efforts to rethink Antonioni’s aesthetics from the perspective of contemporary theoretical frames. Furthermore, they will open up a space for reflection in which I will attempt to challenge the validity of diasporic and accented models for Egoyan’s early features.

One essential reference for a transnational study of Antonioni’s cinema is Laura Rascaroli and John David Rhodes’s recent edited collection – Antonioni: Centenary Essays – marking the centenary of the director’s birth. This text approaches Antonioni’s feature films, shorts, and documentaries from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, in light of current debates and new methodological frameworks. It bears witness to the capacity of Antonioni’s unique and controversial language to address the contradictions of late-modernity, and reappraises its continuing influence on filmmakers from all over the world. In showing that Antonioni’s ‘position in the history of modern cinema is not fixed once and forever, but is mutating and still uncharted in its extraordinary richness and propulsive, experimental innovativeness’, Rascaroli and Rhodes’s scholarship provides a fundamental point of departure for the present study. The essays by Robert S. C. Gordon, Matilde Nardelli, Karen Pinkus, Rascaroli, Angelo Restivo, and Karl Schoonover are particularly relevant to the purposes of my analysis. What I wish to emphasise, however, is that their criticism is not directly concerned with the interactions between themes of technological mediation and motifs of pollution. The former are dealt with in the chapter ‘Medium Specifics’ by Nardelli, Francesco Casetti, and Michael Loren Siegel; the latter are examined separately, in the chapter ‘Ecologies’, by Schoonover, Pinkus, and Rhodes. My research therefore aims to fill this gap, suggesting that these topics have several overlooked points of contact, and that they can be fruitfully explored jointly.

Tschofen and Burwell’s edited collection – Image and Territory: Essays on Atom Egoyan – offers a good starting point from which to consider Egoyan’s cinema. It thoroughly investigates issues such as technology; the performance of identity; personal and collective historical traumas; voyeurism; and hapticity. By using a variety of methodological approaches – including media theories; psychoanalytic discourses; feminism; and postcolonial history – this text encompasses a wide range of interpretative possibilities, framing Egoyan’s

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discourse against a backdrop of theories developed by McLuhan, Marks, Laura Mulvey, Paul Virilio, and others. In the next chapters, I will deal particularly with the essays by William Beard and Batia Boe Stolar. There are, however, many other interesting contributions that pay close attention to practices of technological mediation: Elena Del Río’s analysis of *Family Viewing* (1987), for example, focuses on video technology as an extension of human subjectivity. It argues that Egoyan’s cinema offers an alternative mode of engagement with technology, one that is not inherently fetishistic but relies on the image’s evocative potential.\(^{19}\) Tschofen and Burwell’s collection, however, does not delve into Egoyan’s connections with a tradition of European auteur cinema, nor does it identify a conceptual model of contamination as a means of understanding his interest in the permeability of boundaries. Other fundamental critical works that adopt an authorial perspective are those by Romney and Emma Wilson. Romney closely analyses Egoyan’s shorts and feature films up to and including *Ararat* (2002), situating his cinematic practice in a distinctively postmodern and Canadian context, but also substantiating connections with experimental, mainstream, as well as European filmmaking. In *Atom Egoyan*, Wilson provides an exhaustive overview of Egoyan’s cinema that draws together issues of historical trauma, forcible displacement, and denial of the Armenian genocide with more universal questions such as subjectivity, desire, missing children, sexuality, and rituals of mourning. Romney’s and Wilson’s studies deal with many of the motifs I am interested in; for this reason, I will incorporate them frequently in my discussion. Themes of memory, video aesthetics, family, and identity are also tackled in the essays by Carole Desbarats, Danièle Rivière, Jacinto Lageira, and Virilio, which appear in their pioneering monograph, *Atom Egoyan*. Most recently, McSorley has proposed a new interpretation of *The Adjuster*, situating it in a context of Canadian filmmaking, but also hinting at the influence that European art-house and auteurist traditions had on Egoyan’s language. In accentuating the isolation between the characters and the ‘dislocation of the spectator’, McSorely notes, *The Adjuster* echoes the films of the Italian auteur at a formal, compositional level.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{19}\) Elena Del Río, ‘Fetish and Aura: Modes of Technological Engagement in *Family Viewing’*, in *Image and Territory*, ed. by Tschofen and Burwell, pp. 29-52.

\(^{20}\) McSorley, p. 50.
Alienation, non-communication, malaise, and separation are some of the most commonly encountered terms in critical literature on Antonioni’s cinema. Such canonical readings, as exemplified by the work of Guido Aristarco, are mainly centred on the analysis of the thematic elements that express the existential emptiness of a post-war, bourgeois elite. Pierre Leprohon, for instance, sees Antonioni’s films primarily as a representation of ‘the anguish of existence’. He compares *L’avventura* to Federico Fellini’s *La dolce vita*, both of which appeared in 1960: despite their different styles, these films portray the degeneration and the moral crisis of a bourgeois society, and must be regarded as the ‘first and foremost testimonies on their period’. The alienation depicted by Antonioni, for Leprohon, is essentially determined by specific social circumstances. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, by contrast, regards it more as a psychological state. His 1964 essay ‘Shape and a Black Point’ makes the case that Antonioni’s films are about specific characters and situations – only incidentally about alienation: ‘Antonioni’s main concern as an artist is with things and with people, with shapes, light and shade, social facts and human thoughts and emotions.’ Nowell-Smith and other scholars, such as Kevin Z. Moore, recognise the possibility of a positive form of alienation: although it is true that emotional desolation is thematically relevant to Antonioni’s features, the individual who cannot adapt to the modern environment can also begin ‘a process which, ideally, re-places the self back into a world of its own devising and into a community of like-minded others as well.’

In his book on European art cinema, András Bálint Kovács identifies the general thematic frameworks that recur in modernist art films: one of them is the ‘disconnection of the individual human being from the environment, commonly called alienation.’ Kovács suggests that Antonioni’s modernist works create an atmosphere of ‘human alienation’, which he explains in terms of ‘a problem of

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adaptation’ to an industrialised landscape and to the conditions of modern life in general. Without denying the fact that Antonioni’s cinema represents the experience of loneliness and estrangement of the modern individual, I decided not to draw on questions of modernist alienation because they do not reflect the prescient qualities of his artistic discourse that I wish to uncover. Furthermore, as Peter Brunette has observed, approaches based on alienation have tended to overlook the specificities of the economic, cultural, and historical contexts in which Antonioni’s films were conceived.

Rather, my argument is that the corpus selected for this study testifies to Antonioni’s critical engagement with various questions related to the late-modern condition. A comparison with Egoyan can help disentangle precisely this. As a result, the theoretical lenses that I am going to adopt encompass paradigms of postmodernity and posthumanism, developed by theorists such as Bauman, Braidotti, and Haraway. My discussion will also rely upon feminist, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial discourses, especially through the work of Kristeva, Richard Dyer, Joanne Entwistle, and Homi K. Bhabha. Questions concerning the image will be explored in relation to the scholarship of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Wilson.

Moving beyond the static structures of meaning that conceptual models of alienation arguably epitomise, I will draw extensively on Brunette’s and Sam Rohdie’s monographs on Antonioni. They both reflect a powerful critical effort to reconsider the corpus of the Italian director in a different light. As Brunette remarks, if discourses on alienation and existential anxiety continue to be given prominence to the exclusion of all else, ‘Antonioni’s films will quickly become museum pieces, historical artifacts documenting, at best, a certain moment of film and European cultural industry.’ In rethinking the visual and narrative means of Antonioni’s cinema, Brunette suggests the necessity of resituating these films in the particular cultural and historical context in which they arose. Besides this, he pays close attention to dynamics of gender and representation, largely neglected by the proponents of the alienation thesis. Despite essentialising certain so-called feminine qualities, Antonioni’s images ‘offer a specific analysis of the situation of women in contemporary Western society of

27 Kovács, p. 152.
29 Brunette, p. 2.
the 1960s, an analysis that presents a sustained attack on the patriarchy.\(^{30}\) Brunette also highlights that the political and social textures of Antonioni’s films transcend conventional ideological polarities of left and right. Many features of the Italian auteur, he observes, deal with major technological changes that are altering human nature at its very core.\(^{31}\)

Deeply influenced by Barthes’s writings, Rohdie’s criticism discusses Antonioni in the context of the Italian film industry, interrogating his relationship to a dominant neorealist aesthetic, and exploring notions such as objectivity, identity, and abstraction. Moreover, it casts light on the filmmaker’s fascination with surfaces, interstitial or in-between spaces, and figure/ground relationships. The productivity of instability, for Rohdie, is at the core of Antonioni’s universe. This aspect will be particularly relevant to my investigation. The auteur’s primary interest, Rohdie writes, lies in ‘that moment when things threaten to disappear, to lose shape, and that equally wonderful moment when they come to take shape.’\(^{32}\) Further important contributions are offered by Seymour B. Chatman, Angela Dalle Vacche, and, in a context of Italian-language scholarship, Cesare Biarese, Carlo di Carlo, Lorenzo Cuccu, Aldo Tassone, and Giorgio Tinazzi.

Among the scholars that use the national-cinema paradigm are, with respect to Antonioni, Millicent Marcus, Peter Bondanella, and Gian Piero Brunetta. Regarding Egoyan and Canadian film, I would mention the study of Christopher E. Gittings, as well as Pike’s more recent one. In the field of French-language scholarship, the analysis of Clotilde Simond has already brought Antonioni and Egoyan into dialogue, along with Bresson; her main focus, however, is on Zabriskie Point and Family Viewing.\(^{33}\) John Orr includes Il deserto rosso and The Adjuster in his inquiry into contemporary cinema. While he highlights questions of hygiene and pollution in Antonioni’s film, his discussion of The Adjuster revolves around themes of sacrifice and myth. In particular, it emphasises the duality that the film establishes between ‘rational intervention’ and ‘sacrificial repetition’.\(^{34}\) In a recent collection on Michael Haneke, scholar Vinzenz Hediger contrasts the ‘pathogenic’ use of video in the early films of the

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\(^{30}\) Brunette, p. 9.


\(^{32}\) Sam Rohdie, Antonioni (London: British Film Institute, 1990), p. 100.


Austrian director with Egoyan’s configuration of the same medium as a conduit for sexual desire and compassion in Family Viewing. His contribution refers to an imagery of infectiousness in relation to video and the social pathologies it can generate; for Hediger, however, this framework applies more to Haneke than it does to Egoyan.\(^35\)

In conclusion, the following chapters will map out the significant points of intersection between Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s cinemas in terms of mediation and contamination, shedding new light on themes that have been only partially explored by critics. This thesis aims to build upon the existing literature by offering new insights into an overlooked episode in the filmmakers’ careers, which relates to the project of Just to Be Together, and, most importantly, by elucidating the implications of this potential collaboration on a methodological level. Central to my work is the collection edited by Rascaroli and Rhodes, whose approach synthesises theoretical reflections with historical analysis. It serves as a crucial point of departure for a rethinking of the iconic art-house auteur from the perspective of contemporary frameworks, and beyond the specific context of Italian film culture. Moreover, my study will argue for a repositioning of Egoyan’s early features in a non-strictly diasporic context, entering debates around accented and transnational models in film studies.

Chapter One
Reconfiguring Modernity: *Il deserto rosso* and *The Adjuster*

Artistic creativity is suspect because it disturbs the comfort and security of established meanings, because it is expensive and yet free, and because the new society in search of itself, whatever the regime it lives under, has not yet decided what it should think about *luxury*.

Roland Barthes36

1.1 The Impact of Development

The present chapter proposes a comparative reading of Antonioni’s *Il deserto rosso* (1964) and Egoyan’s *The Adjuster* (1991). It will explore how these films renegotiate our experiences of modernity, drawing attention to the dialectical relationship between issues of mediation and contamination, conceived of in a range of different guises. Special emphasis will be placed on the films’ common traits at a cinematographic level, as well as on the thematic concerns that they share – most notably pollution, displacement, destabilisation of perception, and uncertainty over boundaries. The importance of the historical dimension here cannot be overemphasised; as a result, this section presents the reader with an overview of the two storylines that takes into account the specificities of their cultural contexts, and their place in a trajectory of industrial and post-industrial development. Finally, the role of actresses Monica Vitti and Arsinée Khanjian will be compared and contrasted. Sections 1.2 and 1.3 will be devoted to a theoretical analysis that engages in a constructive dialogue with contemporary critical works on the two filmmakers. More specifically, I shall navigate through aspects of *mise-en-scène*, sound, and colour in the light of a Baumanian framework of ‘solid’ versus ‘liquid’ modernity.

Following *Il deserto rosso* and *The Adjuster*, Antonioni and Egoyan find themselves in a similar position with respect to their filmmaking careers. If *Il*

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deserto rosso can be considered as a transitional film, the last that Antonioni shot in Italy before turning to his transnational projects, then The Adjuster represents an important watershed in Egoyan’s oeuvre. These films may be seen as both a summation of the directors’ previous works, and a movement forward towards new forms of expression. From this moment on, Egoyan will also progressively transcend the boundaries of a national film industry, and achieve worldwide recognition.

Chatman and other scholars see Il deserto rosso as the culmination of Antonioni’s ‘tetralogy’, which also includes L’avventura (1960), La notte (1961), and L’eclisse (1962). This is due to the presence of his muse, Vitti, and to the fact that Il deserto rosso is the last film in which a woman figures as the main protagonist. The director, however, challenged this perspective in a famous interview he gave to Jean-Luc Godard: ‘[w]hereas in the earlier films I was interested in relationships between individuals, I am now concerned with the individual in relation to his surroundings […]’, which means that I have a very different approach to the story.

The first of Antonioni’s films to be shot in colour, Il deserto rosso is set in a petrochemical plant on the periphery of Ravenna, in north-eastern Italy, during the years of the post-war ‘economic miracle’. The transformation of Italy from a predominantly agricultural nation to an industrialised one accelerated significantly in the period from 1958 to 1963. Italy experienced a phase of economic boom particularly in the steel and chemical sectors, and a significant expansion in the production of plastic and electrical products. The miracle had a massive impact at all levels of society: it improved living standards, increased consumerism, and promoted urban development, as well as migration from the South to the North. Additionally, the reorganisation of the country around the logic of consumption led to a decline of religion, paving the way for important changes in gender roles and social mores.

The plot of Il deserto rosso centres on Giuliana (Monica Vitti), a woman married to a successful industrialist. As Antonioni elucidates, her ‘neurotic state’ is engendered by ‘the gulf she feels between her own sensibility, intelligence

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38 Jean-Luc Godard, ‘Jean-Luc Godard Interviews Michelangelo Antonioni’, trans. by Elizabeth Kingsley-Rowe, Movie, 12 (Spring 1965), 31-34 (p. 31).
and way of life, [...] and the rhythm which is imposed upon her.

Unable to adapt to a transfigured reality, Giuliana experiences a crisis of vision that involves her relationship with the external world, the impact of which is reflected in her perception of certain colours and sounds. During the hut sequence, she cries out: ‘Ma cosa vogliono che faccia coi miei occhi? Cosa devo guardare?’

To recreate the effects of Giuliana’s malaise, Antonioni defies realism by making an audaciously expressive use of many elements of cinematography: framing; composition; camera movement; colour; sound; focal lengths; and editing. My intention here is only to provide an overview of these characteristic traits; in the rest of this chapter, however, I will be further developing the most relevant ones, integrating them into my comparative analysis.

*Il deserto rosso* is commonly considered as a milestone in its use of colour and long focal length lenses, which affect the way in which a subject relates to the background. Antonioni employed such lenses to flatten depth of field and hence to diminish realism; this, he explains, enabled him to put ‘the character in contact with things, because nowadays it’s material objects which are important.’

Italy’s rapidly transforming landscape appears as a collection of chimneystacks, silos, power generators, and phantom cargo ships. Vaporous emissions and mist are used to obliterate surfaces and edges, suggesting instability of vision and perception. Yet the most important element of *Il deserto rosso* is colour: the filmmaker goes so far as to accentuate its artificiality by hand-painting the elements of the *mise-en-scène* (see also subsection 1.3.3). As Brunette observes, ‘color is not a fulfilment in the sense that it leads inevitably, in a necessary, natural progression, toward greater realism’; rather, ‘color here becomes a kind of apotheosis of formalist abstraction, part of Antonioni’s antirealist campaign.’

The interrelationship of human and ground, of people and objects, is a central element of Antonioni’s artistic discourse. This film abounds with shots that frame the human figure within the mercantile wastelands and industrial debris of post-war Italian society. In an early sequence, Giuliana buys a sandwich from a passenger and devours it furtively behind a mound of detritus,

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40 Godard, pp. 31-32.
41 Passage transcribed from film. ‘What do people expect me to do with my eyes? What should I look at?’
42 Godard, p. 34.
43 Brunette, p. 91, author’s emphasis.
under the gaze of her son Valerio (Valerio Bartoleschi). We gradually learn that she is recovering from what her husband Ugo (Carlo Chionetti) calls a car accident, but in reality is more likely to be a suicide attempt. Corrado Zeller (Richard Harris) is a visiting engineer in search for men to recruit for an entrepreneurial project in Patagonia. Corrado and Giuliana are attracted to each other; when he decides to visit the Medicina Astronomical Observatory to look for potential workers, she goes with him. In a later scene, Giuliana, Corrado, and Ugo are walking towards a fisherman’s cabin in a polluted estuary, where they meet with other friends from the emergent managerial elite, Max (Aldo Grotti), Linda (Xenia Valderi), and Emilia (Rita Renoir). Along the riverbank, we glimpse a scenario of desolation and contamination by hazardous chemicals: grey sky, dead trees, and puddles of fluorescent yellow-green water. Fishermen have abandoned the area because the fish taste of petroleum.

Inside the hut, the wooden boards are painted red. The characters talk about sex and aphrodisiacs without any inhibition. Love, in *Il deserto rosso*, is always inadequate, and sex provides no real mediation. After realising that they need some wood to warm up the place, Emilia and Corrado start to demolish the cabin (it belongs to a young man, Orlando, who works in Max’s factory). Suddenly, an off-screen shout is audible; Giuliana reacts to it for a moment, but soon goes back to play frivolous sexual games. A mysterious ship, which has previously docked close to them, is being put in quarantine. At this point, Linda remembers having heard someone – probably the ill person on the ship – crying out, but all the men deny having heard anything. At first, she insists, but then, to her husband’s comment – ‘sarà stato nel tuo romanzo’ – she unexpectedly replies – ‘dici? Può darsi.’

The spectre of an infectious disease panics Giuliana. An eloquent thick fog has swallowed one by one her husband and friends, conveying a sense of existential isolation. She gets into the car and drives along the pier, an act that is reminiscent of her earlier suicide attempt.

In a later scene, Giuliana discovers that Valerio cannot stand or walk. Fearing that he has contracted polio, she tells him the story of a young girl living in an uncontaminated island with pink sand. This is the only sequence of *Il deserto rosso* that is shot without any visual manipulations, as there are neither set paintings, nor colour filters placed over the camera lens. The previous electronic music and intrusive industrial noises disappear and are replaced by

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44 Passage transcribed from film. ‘You read it in your novel.’ ‘Do you think so? Maybe.’
the placid sound of the sea. Antonioni describes this scene as a product of Giuliana’s imagination and a materialisation of her desire to escape; according to him, it signifies the difficulties she faces in adapting herself to the suffocating modernity of her social milieu.45 One morning the girl sees a ghost sailing ship and hears an unexplainable female singing voice. Unable to locate its source, she goes into the sea and suddenly realises that the eroded rocks resemble flesh. ‘Ma chi era che cantava?’ – asks Valerio. ‘Tutti cantavano’, Giuliana replies.46

As we learn later, Valerio was feigning his illness for maternal attention. Desperate, Giuliana goes to Corrado’s hotel room. She touches all the objects around her, as if to ascertain their existence. After they make love, the room takes on a pink shade, the same colour as the sand on the paradisiacal Sardinian beach. In this shot, Antonioni’s use of light and colour has the effect of flattening the space between different planes, confusing figure and ground, and displaying them along the same surface.47 The intimacy with Corrado exacerbates Giuliana’s crisis. Eventually, she leaves him and reaches a ship at the dock, where she attempts to communicate her feelings of isolation and separateness to a Turkish sailor: he does not understand, and his answer is unintelligible. The narrative ends where it began, with Giuliana and Valerio walking together outside the factory. She tells him that the yellow smoke emitted by the chimneys is poisonous, but the birds have learnt to fly around it.

Since the discovery of oil and natural gas after the end of World War II, the Po Valley had become an area of massive industrial pollution. A decade before the release of Antonioni’s film, Enrico Mattei was named President of ENI (Ente Nazionale degli Idrocarburi), a state holding company which was granted exclusive rights of exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbons in the Po Valley. Mattei set up a series of petrochemical refineries on the Adriatic coast near Ravenna, primarily for the production of plastics and synthetic rubber. P. Adam Sitney’s reading of Il deserto rosso invites us to consider how psychoanalytic themes are interwoven with historically situated anxieties of pollution and disease.48 In his analysis of the Italian art cinema of the 1960s,

45 Godard, p. 32.
46 Passage transcribed from film. ‘Who was singing?’ ‘Everybody’.
47 Rohdie, p. 157.
Restivo introduces the concept of ‘stain’, an uncanny visual element that he describes as ‘out of place’. Even though he argues for an understanding of Antonioni’s cinema in relation to the profound changes that occurred during the economic miracle, Restivo’s scholarship is taken into account only marginally in this dissertation, partly because of its psychoanalytic approach, and partly because of the attention it pays to the legacy of neorealism, which is not the principal focus of my study. Most recently, other scholars have maintained that Antonioni’s oeuvre contains signs of an ecological anxiety. Pinkus has put the director forward as the ‘cinematic poet laureate of climate change’, suggesting that his films deal proleptically with the release of invisible greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Schoonover’s perceptive essay discusses Il deserto rosso and some of Antonioni’s earliest short documentaries within the context of Italy’s post-war economic development and its detrimental effects on the environment. In section 1.2, I will actively engage with some of the themes it has brought to the fore. What I want to underline, however, is that it would be wrong to interpret Antonioni’s aesthetics as entirely dystopic, or as denoting a simple juxtaposition between toxic and natural. One purpose of my entire thesis, indeed, is to shed light on those aspects of Antonioni’s cinematic style that do not conform to critical approaches based on binary distinctions. This means that I will pay close attention to how Il deserto rosso expresses uncertainty over boundaries, so as to show evidence that it reiterates concepts of contamination and breakdown of dichotomous oppositions at several levels. Speaking to Godard in the interview conducted in 1964, the director made clear that Il deserto rosso does not simply mourn the loss of an ecologically harmonious pre-industrial past. Antonioni’s ambition is rather to show a reality that has been both destroyed and embellished by its violent encounter with modernity, while at the same time advocating human adaptability to a rapidly changing technological environment. I will return to this concept in Chapter

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52 Godard, p. 31. The extract from the interview I am referring to is quoted at the beginning of subsection 2.2.1.
Two, as it provides the rationale for applying a posthuman perspective to some of Antonioni’s works.

When compared to *Il deserto rosso*’s industrialised spaces of northern Italy, the late twentieth-century multi-ethnic, postcolonial society portrayed in *The Adjuster* appears to be a considerable step forward in terms of economical and technological development. Daniel Bell’s concept of ‘post-industrial society’ can be useful to frame the extent and implications of this transformation.  

Whereas industrial societies are based on the secondary sector, post-industrial societies are dominated by services. The mass consumption of goods by an increasing population is reflected in the growth of finance, real estate, and insurance sectors. The central figure has shifted from the engineer to the professional, while the role of power and energy is now played by information.

Egoyan’s *The Adjuster* tells the story of Noah Render (Elias Koteas), whose job consists of itemising the possessions that his clients lost in house fires, and his wife Hera (Arsinée Khanjian), a film censor. The narrative develops along two separate plotlines that progressively converge: the first deals with the life of the adjuster and his family; the second revolves around the erotic fantasies staged by a rich and bored couple, Bubba (Maury Chaykin) and Mimi (Gabrielle Rose).

The film opens with dark images of Noah’s hands in close-up. It is night, and Noah wanders nervously around his house, looking out of the window with a torch. We see Hera sleeping next to him. Indistinct moaning and groaning sounds contribute towards an uncanny atmosphere. Noah has to leave to visit a client, Arianne (Jennifer Dale), whose house is on fire. We are then introduced to the first of Bubba and Mimi’s role-plays: on the underground, an elegantly dressed Mimi grabs the hand of Bubba, disguised as a homeless man, and puts it between her legs. Like the viewer too, Hera, who is sitting opposite to them, watches the scene with shock and disgust (for a discussion of the appearance of the body and the use of clothing, see subsection 2.2.3). As Romney has commented, the distinction between reality and fantasy has almost entirely vanished in *The Adjuster*: ‘the world itself becomes a cinematic display of illusion.’

A sound bridge juxtaposes two contrasting settings: the projection room,

54 Bell, pp. 126-128.
55 Romney, p. 77.
where the censors work, and the Renders’ family home. This shot transition may create the impression that Simon (Armen Kokorian) and Seta (Rose Sarkisyan), Hera’s child and sister respectively, are actually within the film being projected to the censors. Yet this is not the case, and the pornographic content of the diegetic film is aurally revealed to the spectators. After a brief shot of Noah armed with a bow and shooting arrows out of the window, the dichotomy between purity and impurity is brought to the foreground: while Mimi is having a shower, Bubba collects dirt from his hands. According to Egoyan, this scene implies the realisation that, biblically speaking, human beings were created from dust.⁵⁶ As the director indicates, this is only one of the many biblical allusions that the film contains (the symbolism of names, for example, forms a dense web of references to Greek mythology and the Jewish tradition).

In the projection room of the Censor Board, Hera illicitly videotapes the pornographic material on screen. Meanwhile, Bubba reaches an abandoned housing estate, where brightly coloured billboards advertise a series of non-existent houses inhabited by the perfect nuclear family. This scene, filmed in suburban Toronto, is the first to unfold in an outdoor location. Intrigued by the photographs of the Renders’ house, Mimi prompts Bubba to get pictures of the inside. In another sequence, we view Noah and Arianne visiting the ruins of her house. As he repeats his routine verdict, ‘You may not feel it, but you’re in a state of shock’, she looks calm rather than devastated.⁵⁷ Like the mythical Ariadne, she is tracing a way out of a labyrinth: her house fire was deliberate. Purification by washing and burning is evoked on several occasions; interestingly enough, Seta burns a series of photographs – the visual fetishes of her former life in Lebanon – whilst listening to, and hence preserving, her homeland’s traditional music.

Reassuring moments can become suddenly threatening in the world of The Adjuster, and this causes discomfort in both viewers and characters. In one scene, the head censor, Bert (David Hemblen), interviews the young Tyler (Don McKellar), who recites the real guidelines of the Ontario Film Classification Act. ‘We’re here to classify’, Bert suggests, hinting at the fact that Hera’s job, just as Noah’s, involves forms of categorisation and mediation.⁵⁸ Yet Noah goes far beyond the normal duties of an adjuster: after taking his clients to a motel, his

⁵⁶ The Adjuster, DVD commentary by Egoyan.
⁵⁷ Passage transcribed from film.
⁵⁸ Passage transcribed from film.
suburban ark, he offers his body to alleviate their distress. Paradoxically, Noah is deeply absorbed in these people’s needs, but insensible to his own sense of dissatisfaction and alienation. For Wilson, he has a ‘fetishistic relation to his professional responsibilities’.\(^59\) When Larry (Stephen Ouimette) and Matthew (Raoul Trujillo), a gay couple, show him photographs of their former house, the adjuster uses them to evaluate their lifestyle. In assigning a monetary value to objects, however, he neglects their emotional significance: ‘is that a purebred?’ – he asks about the dog they have just lost.\(^60\)

The act of viewing as a mechanism for objectification is a constitutive element of Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s cinematic languages. In Il deserto rosso, vision is rendered defective and unreliable from the very beginning of the film: the opening credits are a succession of out-of-focus shots of factories that calls into question our epistemological relation to the real. In The Adjuster, the theme of vision has voyeuristic connotations that, as critics suggest, formulate a meta-cinematic reflection: to quote Beard, ‘[i]t is a film about the instrumentalizing gaze of the camera and, reflexively, the power of image-narratives to capture, interpret, and very often distort the human world.’\(^61\) Seta, a recent émigré who does not speak English, has become addicted to the videotapes that her sister brings home. Sarkisyan uncannily combines maternal and sexual elements here, especially if we think that she previously played Van’s Armenian mother in Family Viewing.\(^62\) In one scene, a homeless voyeur peeks at her through the window and masturbates. The act of looking into someone else’s house embodies a voyeuristic curiosity that is a metaphor for the cinematic experience itself, with all the necessary references to the tradition of cinematic melodrama (see section 1.2). This is made even more evident by the fact that the Renders live in the only occupied house – a demonstration model to show prospective buyers – on an unfinished housing development. The uncanny infiltration of the Peeping Tom anticipates that of Bubba, who presents himself as a filmmaker in search of a domestic location. Talking about himself and Mimi in the third person, he explains: ‘they have the means to have everything they want, but they don’t know what they need, so they try different things.’\(^63\)

\(^{59}\) Wilson, Atom Egoyan, p. 47.
\(^{60}\) Passage transcribed from film.
\(^{62}\) Wilson, Atom Egoyan, p. 56.
\(^{63}\) Passage transcribed from film.
As the director points out, *The Adjuster* contains fragments of plotlines that, in earlier versions of the script, were given further development. One of these revolves around a chiropodist, met by Hera on the underground (originally, this character was intended as a foot fetishist). Their brief dialogue conjures up images of contagion and spread of infections.

Photography, conceived of as a means of appropriation and commodification, is another central theme of the film. Let us consider, for instance, the sequence in which Bubba climbs the stairs unnoticed and photographs Hera, Seta, and Simon in their sleep; or the shot that recreates Matthew’s erotic pose in one of his photographs. Noah’s intercourse with him is filtered through representational forms. Photographs play an important role as mediators, Wilson notes, also with regard to the adjuster’s professional practice: ‘[t]hey provide a visual inventory of what has been lost and become transitional objects between Noah and his clients.’ In making loss inventories for his clients, the adjuster totally relies on photography’s indexical relationship to the world. One might argue that the incorporation of photographs and screens within the filmic texture conveys a sense of fixity and confinement that is counteracted by the choice of vast, barren settings (this opposition will be discussed in more detail with regard to *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin*, see also section 3.3). Among the aspects that enhance the film’s meta-cinematic exploration is also the casting of actress Jennifer Dale, who starred in Robin Spry’s romantic drama *Suzanne* (1980) (shots from Spry’s film appear on a television screen in the motel). This intertextual reference allows us to infer that Arianne has relinquished a life based on artifice and performance.

When Tyler spots Hera filming the hard-core material, he reports her to Bert. Marginalised by an expressive shot composition, Hera explains that the videotapes are intended for her sister. ‘By censoring films’, Naficy suggests, ‘Hera adjusts them to fit the official codes and the public taste, and by screening them for her sister, she helps to undermine them.’ Bert and Tyler do not believe Hera, and organise a rape to teach her a lesson. In the meantime, Bubba has transformed the model home into a lavish film set, and is preparing to shoot a pornographic sequence that involves a group of children. In the film’s denouement, Noah catches him as he is pouring gasoline on the floor:

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64 *The Adjuster*, DVD commentary by Egoyan.
65 Wilson, *Atom Egoyan*, p. 52.
66 Naficy, p. 179.
encounter, here, is between the protagonist and his alter ego. According to Wilson, the ‘distressing contamination’ between Egoyan’s characters – noticeable also in the mirroring between Hera and Mimi, or Simon and his teddy bear – formulates a critique ‘on the production of meaning through character in cinema’.67 This, I would say, could be seen as continuing the discourse on actors and ‘speaking parts’ initiated with his previous film (see subsection 2.2.3).

Pointing at the props that fill the elaborate *mise-en-scène*, Bubba states: ‘these are a few of my favourite things’, quoting Julie Andrews’s song in *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965).68 Noah flees before Bubba sets fire to the model home, killing himself and Mimi. By revealing that Hera, Seta, and Simon were once Noah’s clients, the final flashback calls into question all that the film has encouraged us to assume. For Amy Taubin, ‘Noah has no wife. Hera is just another client who was burned out of her house and whose claim was never settled. Noah hasn’t lost his home because he never had one.’69 Another, and perhaps more plausible, explanation is offered by Wilson: ‘Noah has a home for a time, which he makes temporarily with Hera; but all homes in Egoyan remain temporary.’70 Drawing attention to the transient and constructed nature of domestic sites in Egoyan’s cinema, Naficy comments that, in *The Adjuster*, ‘the family structure undergoes a transformation from being based on descent and blood to one that is almost entirely derived from consent and contract.’71

Before continuing with my comparative discussion, I would suggest that this pair of films invites us to see the relationship between Egoyan and Khanjian as replicating the one between Antonioni and Vitti.72 The complex ways in which the two directors position their muses and real life partners in what Wilson has defined as ‘a danger zone of representation’ will progressively emerge in the course of my analysis.73 Meanwhile, it is interesting to note how this topic can provide original insights into the dialectics of mediation and contamination in *Il deserto rosso* and *The Adjuster*. Vitti embodies a desire to overcome separation

68 Passage transcribed from film.
69 Amy Taubin, ‘Burning Down the House’, *Sight and Sound*, 2.2 (June 1992), 18-19 (p. 18).
70 Wilson, *Atom Egoyan*, p. 60.
71 Naficy, p. 178.
72 For further biographical information on Vitti and her personal and professional relationship with Antonioni, see Laura Delli Colli, *Monica Vitti: Filmografia e ricerche* (Rome: Gremese, 1987), pp. 17-27. See also Tassone, p. 23.
between individuals. She is central to Antonioni’s filmic process, as it is mainly (but not exclusively) through the assimilation with her neurotic world-view that Il deserto rosso achieves its colouristic excess and aesthetic freedom. In this sense, Antonioni’s muse filters our vision, and her mediation is reminiscent of the role as a ‘female viewer’ or ‘female adjuster’ that Wilson ascribes to Khanjian.⁷⁴ Yet if Giuliana is particularly sensitive to threats of viral infection and environmental pollution, Hera’s decision to bring pornographic videotapes into the model home reconfigures her as an active agent of contamination; this, as Gittings has commented, works to undermine the traditionally censorial role that the woman was endowed with in post-war Hollywood melodrama (I will return to the notion of cinematic melodrama in the following section).⁷⁵

As Wilson writes, it is thanks to Egoyan’s intermingling of his filmmaking career and private life that spectators come to realise that “[a]rt, and cinema as an art form, offers no safe space but is always already contaminated by life.”⁷⁶ This contamination is typical of many of his early works, and is not limited to Khanjian. Arshile, the couple’s son, has starred in the short film A Portrait of Arshile (1995); in Next of Kin and Calendar (1993), Egoyan himself plays the parts of an Armenian relative and a photographer, respectively. Wilson notices that Khanjian is often offered the role of mediator (translator in Calendar, censor in The Adjuster), but her analysis focuses in particular on Exotica, where the actress plays Zoe, the strip club’s pregnant owner. Through the intercession of Egoyan’s wife and constant muse, Wilson argues, Exotica reveals a fundamental instability of identity categories, which allows the director to enter debates over gender and the gaze by troubling heterosexual models of cinema spectatorship.⁷⁷ In Il deserto rosso and The Adjuster, the presence of the directors’ partners on screen brings the specificity of a gendered perspective contaminated by aspects of real life. As Wilson claims, however, the opposite is equally true, since private and public dimensions are likely to affect each other reciprocally.⁷⁸ In an interview with Geoff Pevere, Egoyan talks about his feeling of uneasiness when, following the release of Calendar, people started to ask if

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Khanjian and him had actually broken up.\textsuperscript{79} Considering that there is not much academic literature on this aspect of the Antonioni-Vitti relationship, these reflections open up questions that future research will hopefully address.

### 1.2 Objects and Waste

In their analysis of \textit{Il deserto rosso}, Biarese and Tassone draw attention to how Ugo describes his wife’s condition: ‘non riesce a ingranare’.\textsuperscript{80} As the critics suggest, Ugo unconsciously uses the right term here: ‘Giuliana infatti rifiuta di essere una rotella dell’ingranaggio di un mondo disumanizzato nel quale le è impossibile riconoscersi.’\textsuperscript{81} During the economic miracle, with its unprecedented production of consumer items, the mechanisation of human life became an inevitable outcome of economic development. In the following excerpt of dialogue from \textit{The Adjuster}, Noah, who is visiting the wreckage of Arianne’s house, hints at the objectification of the individual in a similar way:

\begin{quote}
Arianne: What exactly are we listing here, Noah?
Noah: Valuables, Arianne.
Arianne: Of a certain lifestyle. When that lifestyle has been destroyed…
Noah: … you build it up again.
Arianne: From what, Noah? To what?
Noah: To what it was.
Arianne: Why?
Noah: Because that’s what you had.
Arianne: So that means that’s what I have to have.
Noah: That’s what your claim was based on, what you need to return things to normal.
Arianne: Which is?
Noah: Which is whatever you think it is that you need to make you feel like you are functioning in the right way.\textsuperscript{82}
\end{quote}

The primary focus of this section is on the mediating role of objects, and on how they are suggestive of the association between \textit{mise-en-scène} and cinematic melodrama. The directors’ attention to material things is informed by discourses

\textsuperscript{80} Passage transcribed from film. ‘She cannot get herself in gear’.
\textsuperscript{81} Cesare Biarese and Aldo Tassone, \textit{I film di Michelangelo Antonioni} (Rome: Gremese, 1985), p. 124. ‘Giuliana indeed refuses to be a cog in the machinery of a dehumanised world in which she cannot recognise herself.’
\textsuperscript{82} Passage transcribed from film, emphasis added.
on modernity, economic development, and consumerism, which section 1.1 contextualised in the transition from industrial to post-industrial societies. In the final part of this section, I will discuss the ways in which the centrality of the object is counteracted by a tendency towards waste, dematerialisation, and amorphous abstraction; here I am referring in particular to Antonioni, although Egoyan is arguably involved in a comparable process that revolves around concepts of decay and destruction by fire.

One aspect that Il deserto rosso and The Adjuster share, I suggest, is the emphasis on the ontological reality of objects within the mise-en-scène. Antonioni explained to Godard that he used brightly coloured objects made of plastic or other synthetic materials as a manifestation of the world of industry and its dominance over people’s lives.  

Let us consider, for instance, the blue steel rails and banisters inside Ugo and Giuliana’s house: in recalling the coloured pipes of the factory, they signify the invasion of the domestic space by the realm of industry. During the sequence in which Corrado visits the petrochemical plant with Ugo, the camera abruptly shifts from medium to long and extreme long shot, disregarding the rules of conventional filmmaking. Antonioni’s treatment of spaces is famously non-anthropocentric, and often leans towards abstraction. When a blast of steam is exhaled, it engulfs the characters, and the interfering noise becomes so loud that we cannot hear their dialogue at all anymore. The primacy of the human subject is neglected also through shots in which people appear behind pipes, gratings, and steel structures. As many critics have remarked, Giuliana’s entrapment within the standardised world of her husband’s factory is externalised through the spatial arrangement of the elements within the frame, and a mise-en-scène saturated with heavy industrial machinery. In her recent essay on ‘objectuality’ in Blow-Up (see also subsection 2.2.3), Rascaroli highlights the centrality of objects to the films of the tetralogy, where they primarily serve as status symbols, emblems of the modern condition and of a bourgeois way of life. In Il deserto rosso, she argues, the material presence of things does not only intensify, but is also endowed with a ‘mysterious aura’: examples of this are the radio

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83 Godard, p. 32.
85 See, for instance, Brunette, pp. 93-94.
telescopes that researchers use to decipher faint radio signals from the cosmos, and the many vessels passing through the foggy estuary area. As Rascaroli comments, it is in this threatening encounter between technological innovation and inanimate objects that the protagonist’s dissociation from her surroundings becomes most evident. With regard to this, Restivo suggests that the destabilisation of figure-ground relationships that we find in *Il deserto rosso* continues in many of Antonioni’s later works. In *Blow-Up*, the director’s inquiry into the indexical properties of the recorded image is pushed to its limits, particularly when the photographer, shot from a very high angle, is ‘absorbed into the grassy background’ (see also section 2.3). Restivo describes this shot in terms of ‘bodies-becoming-space’, and proposes that the contamination between human figure and ground is an effect of ‘the meeting between a cinematic legacy of neo-realism and the profound spatial transformations that occurred as Italy experienced the economic miracle.’ (Antonioni’s relationship to neorealism will be addressed only in general terms in section 3.3.)

Egoyan’s film reveals an equally expressive use of the *mise-en-scène*. The director accentuates the signifying potential of objects by making them dominant in relation to the other components of the visual field. A clear example of this is the sequence in which Noah visits Tim (Gerard Parkes), a lamp merchant: large stocks of unsold items intrude into the foreground of the frame, interposing between the two characters. Gittings has proposed a reading of *The Adjuster* based on the national cinema paradigm, which brings together both Freudian and Marxist notions of fetishism. According to him, Egoyan’s film provides the foundation for a self-conscious critique of society in Marxist terms: ‘*The Adjuster* makes visible the sterility of a family and home life that are themselves becoming commodities, and thus structures of alienation under late-corporalism.’ Reading the scene described above in this light, we can see the excessive *mise-en-scène* as revealing the mediation of human relations by things and a suffocating consumer ideology. Even Noah’s sexual intercourse with Arianne is punctuated by remarks about the progress of her insurance claim. The discourse on commodity fetishism is suspended only when the

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87 Rascaroli, pp. 64-81 (pp. 67-68).
88 Restivo, ‘Revisiting *Zabriskie Point*,’ in *Antonioni: Centenary Essays*, ed. by Rascaroli and Rhodes, pp. 82-97 (pp. 87-88).
89 Restivo, ‘Revisiting *Zabriskie Point*,’ pp. 82-97 (p. 88).
90 Gittings, p. 142.
domestic site is destroyed, and the characters are forcefully displaced from their suburban dream.\footnote{Gittings, pp. 143-144.}

As Gittings writes, the 1950s graphic style of the billboards is reminiscent of Eisenhower’s America and its contradictions:

Egoyan’s suburbia is the Eisenhower dream turned inside out, a nightmare vision where the \textit{heimlich} discourse of suburban home or family is haunted by the \textit{unheimlich}: hard-core pornographic films, voyeuristic masturbators and film-makers, and the spectre of destruction by fire.\footnote{Gittings, p. 142.}

The image of the adjuster shooting arrows at the happy families advertising the Nottingham Forest Estates contributes to the dissolution of the American myth of suburbia, where the logic of consumerism prevails and determines lifestyles. One could note that the way Egoyan frames the landscape here, as an empty space bombarded by giant advertising billboards, is evocative of \textit{Zabriskie Point} (1970). In his recent scholarship, Restivo has offered a reading of this controversial film that draws on Jean Baudrillard’s theories to explore the conflict between the Italian auteur’s formal style and the American desert landscape. In \textit{Zabriskie Point}, Antonioni’s destabilisation of figure-ground relationships – most evident in the love scene in the Death Valley – encounters the American imagery and the cityscape of Los Angeles.\footnote{Restivo, ‘Revisiting \textit{Zabriskie Point’}, pp. 82-97 (pp. 88-89).} The following extract from Restivo’s essay can help to illustrate the many points of contact between \textit{Zabriskie Point}, \textit{The Adjuster}, and \textit{Il deserto rosso}, notably because of its formulation of the transition from an object-based to an image-based, late-capitalist society. The reference is to the spectacular finale of \textit{Zabriskie Point}: the explosion of the Frank Lloyd Wright-style house, shot from different angles and distances, and ensued by the slow-motion disintegration of a series of household products and commodities (a television set; a refrigerator; a box of Kellogg’s cereals; and many others):

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\text{[\ldots] [T]he film asks us to invest in the image per se. The irony here is that as the object world is systematically destroyed, the image becomes more and more beautiful, more and more ‘for-itself’. On one level, of course, this continues the allegory of \textit{Blow-Up}: the centre of energy of late-capitalism shifts from the production of objects to the production of images. Finally, then, what \textit{Zabriskie Point} registers is}\]

\footnote{91 Gittings, pp. 143-144.} \footnote{92 Gittings, p. 142.} \footnote{93 Restivo, ‘Revisiting \textit{Zabriskie Point’}, pp. 82-97 (pp. 88-89).}
‘the terrible beauty’ of the birth of the postmodern simulacrum, the representation which functions not so much in its relationship to ‘truth’ as in the very blankness of its meaning.94

This should lead us to a better understanding of the similar function that the desert has in Zabriskie Point and The Adjuster. while the post-war economic miracle is most strikingly represented through an oppressive industrial setting, the landscape of late-capitalism has become a barren wasteland of desolation and emptiness. Signs, advertising images, and photographs uncannily fill the spatial void created by the disappearance of the factory. This involves a change in the nature of pollution, too: from poisonous fumes and chemical waste to video pornography. While the latter remains a somewhat impalpable, aural presence, the former have a more tangible effect on the human body – as the photographs of deformed children with polio that Giuliana sees in a magazine demonstrate. In Zabriskie Point, the desert is being turned into a large-scale housing development; just like the model home in The Adjuster, its planned houses have the function of a simulacrum. Rohdie’s remarks about Antonioni’s real estate project can be extended to Egoyan’s: the model houses ‘seem only toys lived in by fake people and which you can blow-up; and the people are like the houses: mannequins, fake, toy people, doubles which are not them but are not anyone else either.’95

Hera’s introduction of the pornographic material into the home, and the consequent appearance of the Peeping Tom, bring to the fore the voyeurism of cinema spectatorship. The meta-cinematic shots that revolve around the production of Bubba’s film further suggest that Egoyan here is interrogating the role of props and commodities as mediators in film. With regard to this, Gittings refers to classical Hollywood melodrama: The Adjuster is a typically Canadian film inasmuch as it represents a critique of the idealised model of family life proposed, in part, by the American film industry, and ‘consumed by Canadian spectators who then attempt to reproduce or perform this American fantasy, only to discover its meaninglessness.’96 According to this view, by exploiting the themes and visual richness of classical melodrama, The Adjuster gives voice to Canada’s concerns about the cultural hegemony of its powerful neighbour. The film’s intertextual reference to The Sound of Music – ‘these are a few of my

94 Restivo, ‘Revisiting Zabriskie Point’, pp. 82-97 (p. 95).
95 Rohdie, p. 143.
96 Gittings, p. 147.
favourite things’ – could be understood in this sense, as a symbolic allusion to the spectacle of commodities and fetish objects in cinema, and, at the same time, as a comment on the dominance of the American film industry in Canada.

When applied to film, the definition of *mise-en-scène* encompasses many visual elements, among which are framing, lighting, shot composition, colour, space, and props. Many critics (e.g. Mulvey) have claimed a close relationship between *mise-en-scène* and cinematic melodrama, identifying expressive uses of interior spaces as typically melodramatic. In his article ‘Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama’, Thomas Elsaesser argues that, whilst in other film genres the characters’ psychological and emotional state can be ‘externalized and projected into direct action’, in the Hollywood family melodrama we witness a ‘sublimation of dramatic conflict into decor, color, gesture, and composition of frame.’ Elsaesser’s formulation refers to films made by directors such as Douglas Sirk, Nicholas Ray, and Vicente Minnelli in the 1940s and 1950s. This form of melodrama, which by definition revolves around the enclosed, claustrophobic setting of the middle-class home, works, to borrow Elsaesser’s phrasing, ‘by a displaced emphasis, by substitute acts, by parallel situations and metaphoric connections.’

In the light of this, we may see the discourse on commodities that *The Adjuster* deploys as a direct comment on the mediating role of props and décor in classical Hollywood cinema. By bringing the object to the foreground, Egoyan makes the spectator aware of its potential for cinematic mediation and signification. Melodrama’s distinctiveness lies in the excessive qualities of its style: the visual orchestration of oppressive forces and latent emotions creates the impression that the world itself is ‘totally predetermined and pervaded by “meaning” and interpretable signs.’ The dystopian world of *The Adjuster*, by contrast, works to destabilise these conventional patterns of significance: when the bookshelves in the model home are revealed to be only a façade, it becomes clear that objects and props have exhausted themselves in the staging of a dramatically absent meaning.

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100 Elsaesser, pp. 366-395 (p. 388).
I now wish to take into account a specific type of mediating object: the toy. In a sequence of *Il deserto rosso*, Giuliana, who has just woken up from a nightmare, enters her son’s bedroom and discovers that a robot toy has been left switched on. The camera follows its mechanical movements – back and forth, between the wall and the bed where Valerio is sleeping – until Giuliana switches it off. Regarding the necessity of historicising this image, Brunette writes: ‘back to the original audience watching the film in 1964, the robot may have been considered a strikingly innovative and appropriate symbol to express the fears of human standardization that filled the discourse of popular culture at the time.’ The robot returns in a later shot, as Ugo plays with Valerio before leaving for a business trip; during this scene, the camera also lingers on a spinning top with a gyroscope inside, and on two objects that further intensify the film’s preoccupation with the nature of vision – a microscope and a model eye.

In *The Adjuster*, Simon is associated with a singing teddy bear. By imitating the cries of various animals, the toy serves as a manifestation of the hyper-mediated culture in which the characters live: this is a world in which signs have defeated their referents, and reality has lost its original value. In addition to this, the singing teddy bear continues the discourse on identity as a performance that Egoyan began with *Next of Kin* (also here the missing child has a teddy bear as its double). Noah continually renegotiates his self according to the person he is dealing with; for this reason, his identity is as erasable as that of Peter, the protagonist of Egoyan’s first feature film (see Chapter Three). In one early scene of *The Adjuster*, the bear’s foregrounded figure dwarfs the characters in the background, while its melody uncannily interferes with their dialogue. This shot, which is not directly functional to the narrative, alludes to the massive circulation of commodities in the home site. Egoyan’s sound device here closely resembles Antonioni’s treatment of steam emissions as a form of ‘noise pollution’. At the end of the film, we realize that the bear is, presumably, one of the few personal possessions that Hera and Seta managed to save from the fire that originally destroyed their home. While the sisters are looking at their burning house, Seta is holding the teddy bear in her arms. As Wilson notes, in Seta’s photographs of Lebanon we get a glimpse

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101 Brunette, p. 98.
102 Naficy, pp. 180-181.
of another little boy: this leads us to speculate about her own personal motivations, and about a traumatic past that we can only conjecture.\footnote{Wilson, Atom Egoyan, p. 61.}

In his study of Antonioni’s treatment of space, David Forgacs highlights how the director’s formalist and abstract tendencies combine with a certain prominence given to sexuality through shots of women’s bodies. For Forgacs, Il deserto rosso differs from Antonioni’s previous films for the way in which place externalises the neurosis of Giuliana: ‘[t]he film was in fact an experiment in making the exterior surroundings both manifest and condition the interiority of a character.’\footnote{Forgacs, pp. 101-111 (p. 105).} Forgacs, who sees the opposition between natural and industrial landscapes as inherently gendered, suggests that Valerio’s toys belong to the masculine realm of science.\footnote{Forgacs, pp. 101-111 (p. 106).} The same applies to the domestic setting: ‘the hi-tech house is part of that masculine technocratic rationality from which Giuliana imagines a regressive escape both to childhood (she is, in fantasy, the girl in her story) and to “nature”.’ Antonioni uses many long shots to frame Vitti’s body in Il deserto rosso; this, Forgacs continues, triggers a ‘conflict between her outward physical beauty and her inner sickness, between her objectification as a sexed body to be desired and her subjectivity as a mind in crisis.’\footnote{Forgacs, pp. 101-111 (p. 109).} In the scene where she switches off the robot, Vitti’s upper body is significantly left out of the frame. A sense of disorientation is caused by the fact that, for the eye of the camera, the toy has replaced her as the main object of interest.\footnote{Brunette, p. 98.}

Antonioni explained the function of the robot as follows: ‘through playing with toys of this kind, he [Valerio] will adapt himself well to the life in store for him. […] Toys are a product of industry which, in this way, influences even children’s education.’\footnote{Godard, p. 32.} This could be extended to the teddy bear in Egoyan’s film: toys similarly function as transitional objects here, mediators between infancy and adult life. They serve to epitomise the kind of life that the little boys must adjust to. In doing so, these particular objects also denote a movement away from a blissful condition of maternal plenitude and towards one of increasing disconnection and artifice. Valerio unconsciously alludes to this fantasy of reunion between mother and child by showing that one plus one can equal one when you merge two drops of liquid together. The gyroscope,
however, symbolically marks his entry into the order of scientific progress, professionalism, and division that his father represents. The gyroscopic effect, Ugo explains, is used to stabilise ships in rough seas. This kind of control is impossible for Giuliana; instead, she associates the sea with a vague desire to escape: ‘Non sta mai fermo, mai... Mai, mai. Io non riesco a guardare a lungo il mare, sennò tutto quello che succede a terra non mi interessa più.’\(^{109}\) With its natural colours and sounds, the island sequence bespeaks a state of pre-birth plenitude and primal undifferentiation between the self and the world. The anthropomorphic qualities of the rocks suggest the harmonious merging of human body and natural landscape. This, as Murray Pomerance writes, ‘can only mean a loss of personal discreetness, a dissolution of the individual self in the surrounding objects and situations of life.’\(^{110}\) For Marcus, the fantasy island is ‘an organic whole that binds all elements to an establishing natural context and forbids any analytic dismemberment of its parts.’\(^{111}\) At this point, it is clear that the gender dynamics at work in *Il deserto rosso* reflect conventional, essentialised dichotomies between reason and instinct, analytical and intuitive modes of thought (albeit gender relations are not the main focus of this study, I will return to these issues in subsection 2.2.1). Having said that, it is also my intention to highlight the subtle ways in which Antonioni’s film troubles this view, and refuses to be constrained by clear-cut binary oppositions.

As we have seen, the emphasis that *Il deserto rosso* and *The Adjuster* place on objects is explainable in terms of practices of mediation. Juxtaposed to this scenario, I would argue, is a tendency to dissolve, abstract, or physically destroy the reality of industry and commodities, with all that they stand for. Defilement is among the several motifs that permeate Egoyan’s film. More than once, Bubba and Mimi hint at the joy of washing dirt away. As he explains: ‘I thought of the reason why people sing in showers. It’s got something to do with... cleaning. The joy of washing things away. [...] Dirt, hair, dead skin.’\(^{112}\) The presence of the chiropodist could be understood in the same way (he treats a colony of warts on Hera’s foot, an erotically tinged act). Beard suggests that

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\(^{109}\) Passage transcribed from film. ‘It never keeps still, never... Never, never. I cannot look at the sea for long, otherwise I lose interest in what happens on land.’


\(^{112}\) Passage transcribed from film.
*The Adjuster* is developed around a series of dichotomous juxtapositions – authenticity and artifice, reality and image, home and fake home – corresponding to two elemental forces of purification and redemption, fire and water. For Romney, Bubba is captivated by the ‘spectacle of domesticity’: ‘[i]f he is driven to defile the home, his underlying urge, as with religious desecration, stems from a sentimental idealisation of what is lacking in his own life.’ Another key theme of *The Adjuster* is touch (see also Chapter Two): raised in silhouette against the flames, Noah’s hand serves, according to Egoyan, as a spiritual symbol. As Wilson comments, however, the trope of the hand carries a double meaning in *The Adjuster*: it is ‘a sign of touch and its inverse, a lack of relations.’ If we consider the intimate, tactile relationship between the two sisters, then touch appears to involve a sincere effort to reach out to the other. Yet at the same time, the hand also signifies masturbation and rape, since this gesture of physical violation is repeated twice, in different circumstances.

There is a moment in *The Adjuster* that recalls a famous abstract shot in *Il deserto rosso*. During Noah and Arianne’s visit to the wreckage of her home, the camera frames the characters from behind the destroyed structure, lingering on the burnt surface of a wall (figure 1.a). For a short time, both Noah and Arianne disappear from our field of vision. Similarly, before Corrado gets out of his car in Via Alighieri, where Giuliana has her empty shop, Antonioni’s camera focuses on what seems to be an abstract painting. When the white Alfa Romeo enters the lower part of the frame, the image reveals itself as the deteriorated surface of a wall (figure 1.b). Rohdie suggests that this shot generates a temporary suspension of figuration, during which also the unfolding plot comes to a halt (a stylistic effect critics refer to as ‘*temps mort*’): ‘the entire volume and depth in which things take place in narratives seems momentarily absent and in its place appears the “emptiness” of a surface image, unmoored, unidentifiable, narratively blank, a kind of eclipse of narrative into abstraction.’ In his reading of the film, Schoonover highlights the marred surface as an element of Antonioni’s aesthetics of waste, noting a striking similarity with a scene towards

113 Beard, ‘*The Adjuster*’, pp. 53-77 (pp. 74-75).
114 Romney, p. 84.
117 Rohdie, p. 175. See also Chatman, *Antonioni*, pp. 126-127.
the end of *The Passenger*: the reporter is sitting on the street of a Spanish village, when he picks a small red flower and smashes it into the white wall behind him. The camera then lingers on the stain left by the crumbling plaster for a few seconds. Schoonover describes these imperfect surfaces as wasted spaces that combine emptiness and abstraction. At the threshold between the diegetic universe and formal experimentation, they mark a moment in which the *mise-en-scène* becomes ‘easily contaminated, the site of a leakage.’

In *Il deserto rosso* and *The Adjuster*, the dominance of objects gives way to moments of abstraction and formlessness, built from the residues of toxic industrial chemicals or fire debris. In these shots, the human figure often disappears into the landscape, or is equalised with it. The fog sequence, described in 1.1, is another example of how Antonioni uses the *temps mort* to oppose the materiality of bodies, investing them with phantom qualities. One could also mention the shapeless yellow mass of burning gas that appears and disappears intermittently at the beginning of *Il deserto rosso*, discharged by the chimneystacks of the plant. It goes without saying that these moments of visual dissolution in which the object on screen lose much of its reality and physical substance are much more frequent and significant in *Il deserto rosso* than in *The Adjuster*. Nonetheless, Egoyan’s reference to the elemental forces of nature originates a similar move from substantiality to insubstantiality: the effect of fire’s destructive agency is indeed to annihilate the dazzling, superfluous commodity, and to relieve the alienation that is part of our encounters with modernity.

In 1964, Antonioni made a famous remark about abstract cinema as a means of uncovering infinite layers of meaning:

> We know that beneath the represented image there is an other image more true to reality, and that beneath that one, still one more, and again a further image beneath that one, until you get to the true image of reality, absolute, mysterious, that no one shall ever see. Or perhaps, one will arrive at the decomposition of any image whatsoever, of any reality whatsoever. The abstract cinema would then have its rationale for existing.

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119 Rohdie, pp. 126-128.
121 Quoted in Rohdie, p. 155.
Dalle Vacche has described *Il deserto rosso* as an ‘existential melodrama that suggests an evaluation of how far Italian society has come since the end of World War II in its pursuit of modernity and technology.’¹²² In her reading, Dalle Vacche provides an account of the works of art that might have had an impact on Antonioni’s filmmaking; in particular, she identifies suggestive similarities in colour strategies with some painters of the *Art Informel* (a post-war movement roughly equivalent to American Abstract Expressionism), and especially Jean Dubuffet and Alberto Burri.¹²³ What all of these artists share, she writes, is ‘a baroque penchant for open-ended, unthreaded, irregular forms charged with expressionist color whose intensity disrupts all shapes, exasperates all meanings.’¹²⁴ Dalle Vacche is revealing a pivotal component of Antonioni’s aesthetics here, which lends itself well to a reading in terms of contamination. During the years of the tetralogy, the director’s visual style acquired a reputation for being abstract in the sense of minimalist. His search for flatness and geometric simplicity has been interpreted by Chatman as expressing ‘a way of controlling, allaying, and sublimating’ a growing anxiety about appearances.¹²⁵ This form of abstraction is arguably animated by a desire for stability, order, and purity: one could say that it echoes Piet Mondrian’s intersecting lines and regular geometric shapes.¹²⁶ The coloured interiors of Giuliana’s shop – blue for the ground and green for the ceiling, cool hues that do not disturb the objects she wants to sell – have been compared to the layered blocks of colour in Mark Rothko’s canvases.¹²⁷ Having said that, the possible pictorial influences of *Il deserto rosso* are too numerous to list exhaustively (for a more extensive discussion, see Dalle Vacche’s chapter ‘Painting as Ventriloquism and Color as

¹²³ Dalle Vacche’s analysis of the impact of painting on Antonioni’s cinematic vision remains, in my view, partly speculative, especially in light of the director’s repeated denials of pictorial influence, which Dalle Vacche herself acknowledges (see, for instance, Godard, p. 34). As Forgacs remarks: ‘if Rothko and the other Colour Field painters of the New York school [...] are influences on *Red Desert*, it’s not so much because shots resemble specific paintings by them, but because Antonioni was stimulated by their paintings to apply their research to his own medium, film’ (*Red Desert*, DVD commentary by Forgacs). Although I would take issue with the idea that Antonioni was consciously trying to emulate the works of abstract expressionism, Dalle Vacche’s scholarship has interesting implications for the ways in which it illuminates the rendering of contamination through impure abstract forms in *Il deserto rosso*.
¹²⁴ Dalle Vacche, pp. 43-80 (p. 70).
¹²⁶ Dalle Vacche, pp. 43-80 (p. 64).
¹²⁷ Brunette, p. 94. See also Chatman, *Antonioni*, p. 54.
Movement’, or the more recent work of Matthew Gandy). The reference to *Art Informel*, in particular, has interesting points of contact with the present study, since it highlights that Antonioni also relies on more regressive, impure, and amorphous types of abstraction, and that these represent a constitutive part of his cinematic vision.

In *Il deserto rosso* and *The Adjuster*, there is no real interaction between people and things. Industrial objects, as Dalle Vacche puts it, ‘have dissociated themselves from the humans who produce them’. Let us take as an example the image of Corrado crossing the storehouse after his speech to the workers: his dwarfed figure nearly disappears into a stock of blue glass demijohns. The excessive presence of props here resembles the moment at which Noah visits the lamp merchant in *The Adjuster*. Antonioni and Egoyan revisit the commodity as a threatening, disconnected presence and a symbol of failed mediation. This is an object that opposes itself to other bodies, and is resistant to touch – prefiguring, perhaps, the emergence of an image culture of simulation, in which signs have become detached from the reality they supposedly represent (the most prominent example of this is pornography as an imaginative substitute for sexual acts). In this context, the object acquires meaning and value only in terms of its relationship with other objects in the same consumerist system. At the beginning of this section, I pointed out that both films express anxiety about the objectification of humanity through dialogue; as Dalle Vacche indicates, also the paralysis of Valerio could be seen in this way, as marking ‘the final stage of this fading of the subject into an undifferentiated objecthood’. Significantly, Bubba decides to include Seta and Simon in his film, because, he says – ‘they would make a nice background’.

This scenario is in striking contrast with the one envisaged by Giuliana: on the fantasy island, the external world reflects the young girl’s condition of harmony and plenitude. Dalle Vacche relates the protagonist’s drive towards an unconscious force to Dubuffet’s works, whose incorporation of unconventional materials produces a vivid evocation of the primal dimension of matter. Such bodily images (blood, faeces, and filth) threaten the viewer with a descent into

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129 Dalle Vacche, pp. 43-80 (pp. 65-66).
130 Dalle Vacche, pp. 43-80 (p. 66).
131 Passage transcribed from film.
'something liminal and unnameable'. The artists of the *Art Informel* share a fascination with processes of decay and regeneration; not unlike Antonioni, who regards the escalating environmental pollution of post-war Italian society as a positive opportunity for experimental creativity, they discover that waste and discarded materials can generate art. There is a sense of bodily as well as historical trauma in this pictorial sensibility, which brings the viewer to experience the original moment when ‘death blends with life’ – for what is ‘formless and open to the future’ is also ‘potentially unstable and regressive’. The manipulation of humble material in the canvases that Burri realised in the early 1950s, using pierced or lacerated sacks, is another important visual reference; this is especially evident in the scene where Giuliana devours her sandwich while standing upon an eerie, rubbish-strewn ground. Dalle Vacche sees the expressive chromatic qualities of these paintings reflected in the red wooden boards of the hut; in dismantling them, she argues, the characters are unconsciously turning the object into debris, signifying that its cycle has come to an end.

If the object’s function is one of mediation, which Egoyan also projects on a meta-cinematic level, then the burnt or expendable object acts as a catalyst for corollary processes of contamination. As things decay, they undergo gradual chemical degradation and are absorbed into the soil, disappearing as discrete entities. On the one hand, material deterioration is part of a system in which objects become obsolete, are thrown away, and then replaced with new ones. On the other, it deprives the commodity of its value and desirable properties – in short, of its magic. In saying this, I do not deny the productive potential of waste for regeneration and acquisition of new aesthetic qualities. Rather, I suggest that the object in ruins is endowed with the subversive power to reveal the cinematic prop as artifice, and the commodity as a simple agglomeration of matter.

My interpretation here draws on Schoonover’s recent essay ‘Antonioni’s Waste Management’, in which late capitalism’s relation to and production of material excess is examined across various works of the Italian director. In

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132 Dalle Vacche, pp. 43-80 (p. 72).
133 Dalle Vacche, pp. 43-80 (p. 72).
134 The influence of Burri’s works on Antonioni’s visual style was previously theorised by film historian Mira Liehm. See Liehm, *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 228-229.
135 Dalle Vacche, pp. 43-80 (pp. 68-69).
particular, Schoonover highlights *N.U.* (1948) and *Sette canne, un vestito* (1949) as key source texts for understanding the politics of waste in *Il deserto rosso*. The economic miracle signalled Italy’s entry into an era of mass consumerism. Yet, as Schoonover suggests, this unprecedented plenitude of dazzling commodities and new synthetic materials comes with new forms of garbage. Antonioni’s exploration of trash, therefore, is not merely a means of engaging with ecological issues, but also a way of bringing to the foreground notions of overproduction and excess: ‘[l]iving with toxic waste seemed to haunt commodity culture’s promise to eradicate need.’ For Schoonover, the director is aware of the dangers of recognising some things as necessary and others as excess, and his aesthetic of waste works precisely to foster this uncertainty, reminding us that ‘what counts as productive is almost always politically and ideologically defined.’

Schoonover’s critical standpoint is pertinent to the present study also for the way in which it calls into question issues of material transformation. Drawing on the work of design historian Ezio Manzini, Schoonover points out that the human perception of materiality changed substantially during the late twentieth-century, and this is primarily because of the introduction and diffusion of radically new synthetic materials. With regard to this, it might be useful to refer to Antonioni’s black-and-white documentary *Sette canne, un vestito*, which critics often link to *Il deserto rosso* not only on account of their industrial settings, but also for a similar attention to chemistry’s transformative potential. *Sette canne, un vestito* describes how viscose fibres are made. The camera follows the chemical transformation of organic material (marsh reeds) into rayon, while an explanatory voice-over chronicles the process in almost magical terms: ‘il miracolo è compiuto. La cellulosa è diventata seta, oppure fiocco, morbido e leggero come neve. Sette canne bastano per un vestito.’ As Schoonover maintains, the diffusion of plastic materials is particularly relevant to Antonioni’s visual style, firstly because they are ‘the most productive and the most wasteful (and waste generative)’, and secondly because it is through

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140 Passage transcribed from film. ‘The miracle has taken place. Cellulose has become silk, or flock, as soft and light as snow. Seven reeds are enough for one dress.’
these synthetic objects that the Italian post-war landscape became suddenly saturated with vibrant colours (see also subsection 1.3.3).\(^{141}\)

However, while Dalle Vacche and Schoonover are mostly concerned with Antonioni’s *mise-en-scène* of abstraction and waste, it is also important to see how these elements of contamination are related to industry and its potential for mediation. *Sette canne, un vestito* presents us with industrial technology as an inherently transformative practice: manipulation at a molecular level allows new materials and new configurations of matter to appear and circulate. An interesting aspect of this scenario is that, in emphasising environmental pollution as a by-product of chemistry, it unveils the mutual imbrications between industrial practices of mediation and contamination. One could say that the transfiguration of materials portrayed in *Sette canne, un vestito* also prefigures *Blow-Up*, where another act of mediation and intervention on the external world depends on a chemical reaction to take place: photographic reproduction. Here, it will be the tenuous surface of the image that undergoes processes of decomposition and amorphous abstraction, incorporating an aesthetic of waste, and generating uncertainty. In my analysis of *Blow-Up*, I will be further interrogating the status of clothing – not so much in terms of the fashion industry, but in terms of a wearable technology that we imagine as a ‘second skin’ (see subsection 2.2.2). *Sette canne, un vestito* tells the story of reeds becoming rayon filaments and, finally, dress. It inaugurates a radically new understanding of materiality based on fluidity, impalpability, and a continual renegotiation of boundaries.

### 1.3 Perceptual Indeterminacy: Sound and Colour

After having examined the interplay of *mise-en-scène*, objecthood, and abstract tendencies in *Il deserto rosso* and *The Adjuster*, I shall extend my analysis by focusing on aspects of sound and colour. Drawing on Bauman’s formulation of the concept of ambivalence, as well as on his distinction between ‘solid’ and ‘liquid’ phases of modernity, subsections 1.3.1 and 1.3.2 will look at important elements in the films’ soundtracks. My discussion will begin by shedding light on two excerpts of dialogue from Egoyan’s film, and then turn to explore the

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disembodied voice as a phenomenon of ambiguity and discordance between sound and visual. Kristeva's theory of abjection, an important point of reference throughout the entire thesis, will be introduced at the end of subsection 1.3.2, in relation to the use of laughter in The Adjuster. Finally, subsection 1.3.3 will develop themes of colour and perceptual indeterminacy through the theories of David Batchelor, concentrating in particular on effects of lighting, chromatic manipulations, and superimpositions of images onto bodies.

1.3.1 From Solid to Liquid

With the term 'modernity', Bauman refers to a historical period which began in seventeenth-century Western Europe with a series of social, scientific and theoretical revolutions, and reached its complete development with two distinct historical phases: the Age of Enlightenment and the growth of industrial society, in both its capitalist and communist variants. Modern times, according to Bauman, are characterised by a fierce war against ambivalence and in favour of order and structure. This manifests itself in a drive towards naming and classifying practices; these, in the specific context of my film analysis, can be productively read as strategies of mediation (the theme of naming will be further developed in relation to The Passenger and Next of Kin, see section 3.2). Classification consists in acts of inclusion and exclusion that presuppose the division of the world into discrete, separate classes:

To classify means to set apart, to segregate. It means first to postulate that the world consists of discrete and distinctive entities; then to postulate that each entity has a group of similar or adjacent entities with which it belongs, and with which – together – it is opposed to some other entities [...].

The classifying project is aimed at eradicating the randomness of chaos, disorder, and ambivalence. Geometry, for Bauman, is the epitome of modern intellect. Yet the world is not reducible to tidy geometric elements. As an example, Bauman cites the modern concern with waste disposal: ‘[w]eeds are the waste of gardening, mean streets the waste of town-planning, dissidence


\[\text{143] Bauman, Modernity and Ambivalence, p. 1.}\]
the waste of ideological unity, heresy the waste of orthodoxy, strangerhood the waste of nation-state building.\textsuperscript{144} If order is a modern practice aimed at the suppression of what escapes definitions, then ambivalence is its radical other. Paradoxically, just as industrial development produces waste, the drive towards rationality and semantic precision generates ambivalence in the sense of polysemy, cognitive dissonance, and contingency.\textsuperscript{145} The modern mind’s urge for classification, therefore, culminates in the amplification of what it aims to exterminate: every cataloguing act elicits more occasions for ambiguity to develop and spread. Potentially, the recourse to classification is infinite – the stricter a grid is, the more accurate labels are, and the less controllable the ensuing chaos will be. Confusion grows relentlessly and cannot be defeated because the war against ambiguity is ‘both self-destructive and self-propelling’.\textsuperscript{146}

To name is to impose a neat and solid structure on the world. The classifying function of language has as its prime objective disambiguation, yet some degree of ambivalence is, needless to say, an inevitable component of any linguistic practice.\textsuperscript{147} Bauman’s conceptual model offers a suitable framework for understanding practices of mediation and phenomena of contamination in \textit{The Adjuster}. Itemising and censoring, indeed, are presented as strategies of mediation with the real that eventually prove inadequate. Their failure reveals how every stable mode of representation and signification retains a space for ambiguity that forces us to confront the impurities of modernity. With regard to this, I would draw attention to the sequence of Tyler’s interview. The dialogue is indicative of how the codification of pornographic material has as its purpose the segregation and suppression of what is disordered and unacceptable. Tyler’s intonation never hesitates; the steadiness of his voice pitch suggests complete lack of emotional involvement. Beard has highlighted the contrast between a horrifying scenario of sadistic pornography and the censors’ impassive, anaesthetised reaction; this, he claims, exemplifies ‘a process of abstraction and reification’ that is characteristic of Egoyan’s cinema:\textsuperscript{148}

\textsuperscript{144} Bauman, \textit{Modernity and Ambivalence}, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{145} Bauman, \textit{Modernity and Ambivalence}, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{146} Bauman, \textit{Modernity and Ambivalence}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{147} Bauman, \textit{Modernity and Ambivalence}, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{148} Beard, ‘\textit{The Adjuster}’, pp. 53-77 (p. 69).
Bert: A. 
Tyler: A graphic or prolonged scene of violence, torture, crime, cruelty, horror, or human degradation.
Bert: B. 
Tyler: The depiction of physical abuse or humiliation of human beings for the purposes of sexual gratification or as pleasing to the victim.
Bert: C. 
Tyler: A scene where a person who is or is intended to represent a person under the age of sixteen appears...
Bert: One. 
Tyler: ...nude or partially nude in a sexually suggestive content, or text, or...
Bert: Two. 
Tyler: ...in a scene of explicit sexual activity.

The dynamics of substitution and signification that this dialogue evokes are multiple: the referent, what occurred in front of the camera, is lost – replaced by words, which in turn are replaced by letters.

In section 1.1, I used Bell’s formulation of industrial and post-industrial societies to place *Il deserto rosso* and *The Adjuster* in their historical contexts. Bauman’s conceptual framework, however, is equally relevant to the purpose of this analysis. His sociological theories concerning liquid modernity shift the focus towards ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ capitalism. While the former is organized around the logic of size, volume and weight, the latter rejects the equation between big and efficient, imposing lightness as an imperative. The transition from solid to liquid modernity is therefore a transition from bulkiness to buoyancy. For Bauman, obsession with boundaries – with making things ‘tight and impenetrable’ – is a distinguishing trait of heavy capitalism.\(^{149}\) The massive, immovable structures that dominate the toxic landscape in *Il deserto rosso* are partially representative of this phase of modernity, with its logic of protection and control. They possess, using Bauman’s terminology, a strong sense of solidity. In light capitalism, by contrast, we witness a collapse of borders and fortresses: labour is disembodied; capital becomes volatile; no structure is permanent or fixed to the ground any longer.\(^{150}\) This emphasis on modernity’s features of fluidity will be particularly useful to contextualise the leaking of pornographic material from the enclosed space of the Censor Board in *The Adjuster*.


\(^{150}\) Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, pp. 120-121.
Liquidity is the metaphor coined by Bauman to convey his analysis of late modern society. It has to do with change and constant motion; unlike solids, which have a clear spatial dimension, liquids flow and cannot hold their shape in time:

They ‘flow’, ‘spill’, ‘run out’, ‘splash’, ‘pour over’, ‘leak’, ‘flood’, ‘spray’, ‘drip’, ‘seep’, ‘ooze’; unlike solids, they are not easily stopped – they pass around some obstacles, dissolve some others and bore or soak their way through others still. From the meeting with solids they emerge unscathed, while the solids they have met, if they stay solid, are changed – get moist or drenched.\textsuperscript{151}

Bauman’s metaphor captures something very important about the nature of the present, and invites us to see the fight against the obscene that takes place in \textit{The Adjuster} in a different light. Institutional attempts to regulate pornography remain fruitless: not only does hard-core break through the barrier of censorship and infect the family home; it also arouses unhealthy sexual desires in the censors, triggering their uncanny complicity. The pornographic spectacle, then, ‘contaminates’ the spectator of \textit{The Adjuster} in several forms: via sound; through the image of the masturbating Peeping Tom; and through Bubba and Mimi’s erotic role-plays. This leakage, I contend, is symptomatic of a late modern society where even what is deemed unacceptable or dangerous can propagate easily, like a biological virus. As Bauman suggests, in liquid times, ‘[n]othing can be credibly assumed to stay in a \textit{material} “outside”. Nothing is truly, or can remain for long, indifferent to anything else – untouched and untouching.’\textsuperscript{152}

Returning to the sequence of Tyler’s interview, let us consider how the dialogue suddenly collapses into a broken pattern of misunderstandings and false perceptions:

Bert: How old are you Tyler?
Tyler: Twenty-eight.
Bert: You still live at home.
Tyler: How did you know?
Bert: I called your number yesterday and an old woman answered. Your mother?
Tyler: (shyly nods)

\begin{footnotes}
\item[151] Bauman, \textit{Liquid Modernity}, p. 2.
\end{footnotes}
Bert: (reassuring) There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. I lived at home till I was thirty-five. It’s very common in some parts of the world. Italy, for example.

Tyler: Are you Italian?

Bert: (threatening) Do I look Italian?

Tyler: (hesitant) N-no.

Bert: Let's continue. D.

Tyler: (hesitant) Hum... D... The explicit and gratuitous depiction of urination, defecation, or vomiting.

Bert: H.

Tyler: (hesitant) A scene where an animal has been abused in the making of a film.

The subtext of Bert’s comment – ‘you still live at home’ – has to do with Tyler’s immaturity. The two characters are trying to classify one another, but with little success: all efforts to pigeonhole the outer world prompt more insecurity and lack of control. The resulting sense of unpredictability, I would argue, exposes the sham, the fragility of the censors’ solid separations and ordering methods.

As these examples illustrate, Egoyan’s exploration of the experience of modernity is rooted in a context of flimsiness, lightness, and fluidity. Naficy aptly remarks that the house itself ‘as a solid, stable, or “real” structure’ is burnt down.\(^\text{153}\) Regarding Antonioni, Bauman’s metaphor is useful to understand how \textit{Il deserto rosso} transcends binary conceptualisations of either solid or liquid modernity: avoiding simplistic categorisations, it is my intention here to propose that this film depicts a society on the verge of entering a liquid, post-industrial phase of development. Antonioni’s cinematic landscape, indeed, extends far beyond the depiction of fixed industrial structures, intersecting with striking images of chemical contamination, liquefaction, and dematerialisation. Drawing attention to what he calls the ‘deliquescence’ of Antonioni’s landscape, Gandy writes: ‘[t]he extensive deployment of fog and mist [...] adds to the aesthetic tensions within the film as the landscape is repeatedly distilled down to an indistinct form in which all traces of human life threaten to disappear completely.’\(^\text{154}\) The narrative reflects and amplifies this impending scenario of fluidity through Corrado’s unwillingness to put down roots. His entrepreneurial project in Patagonia, in particular, sets the stage for the age of globalisation; it is going to break up families, and destroy any semblance of union or stability (the worker’s wife, significantly, is reluctant to let him go). On this point, my interpretation diverges from those of scholars such as Dalle Vacche and

\(^\text{153}\) Naficy, p. 178.

\(^\text{154}\) Gandy, p. 225.
Marcus; the former, for example, sees the dialogues of the film as obsolete, and maintains that ‘at the level of language alone, because the film is so involved with a circumscribed and long-gone historical context, *Red Desert* today feels inevitably dated.’ Marcus understands Corrado’s dissatisfaction and desire for change as his emotional response to a society characterised by alienation. In my view, it rather points to the imminent failure of the structures that constitute modernity in its solid, immobile phase. I regard this aspect as emblematic of the prescience of Antonioni’s film, and of the need to rethink it according to contemporary paradigms of modernity and fluidity. Seen in this light, the mysterious cargo vessels that move along the canals are another unresolved sign of progress in an increasingly globalising reality. Besides suggesting a utopian dream of flight, they also function as harbingers of an unknown, threatening future: we can only imagine where they come from, or what kind of goods they carry inside.

In prefiguring modernity’s liquid dimension, *Il deserto rosso* articulates a process of dissolution of materiality and blurring of perceptual boundaries that manifests itself on a visual, narrative, and aural level. Starting from this premise, the following subsection will explore the eruptions of uncanny or obscene off-screen sounds in both Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s films, arguing that they enact contamination in the sense of liquefaction of order, security, and solid structures of meaning.

### 1.3.2 Fluid Sounds: The Acousmatic Voice

In *Il deserto rosso* and *The Adjuster*, the voice occasionally acquires a high degree of fluidity. It leaks, flows, and seeps out, often hovering beyond the borders of the frame, or intruding into forbidden spaces. Unlike sight, sound can easily penetrate fog, static industrial fortresses, or resist the external constraints imposed by censorship. In the previous subsection, I examined the dialogue between Bert and Tyler so as to show how it operates as an instrument of patriarchal order that is concerned with the impossible task of codifying the real. In Antonioni’s film, the new managerial class, represented in particular by Ugo

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155 Dalle Vacche, pp. 43-80 (p. 78).
156 Marcus, p. 200.
and Max, leans towards a similar solid and authoritative use of the voice. This is made evident by the episode of the off-screen shout, described in section 1.1.

The hut sequence is indicative of how Antonioni’s narrative juxtaposes a masculine, technocratic rationality with a feminine penchant for imaginative and regressive realms. ‘Ma chi vuoi che abbia gridato?’ Max asks dismissively.\(^{157}\) Heard only by two women, the off-screen shout introduces an element of temporal disjunction and loss. As Pinkus has observed, it presents us with a radical ambiguity, as it forces the viewer to think back to the previous scenes, to a place that is not accessible anymore.\(^{158}\) This is redolent, perhaps, of \emph{Il grido} (Antonioni, 1957), where Irma’s final scream is anticipated by the cry of her infant, seen through the window as Aldo walks by her house.\(^{159}\) Yet most crucially, the shout in \emph{Il deserto rosso} marks the point at which aural contamination emerges in the filmic text, triggering ambiguity, perceptual indeterminacy, and a crisis in Giuliana. Linda – who, unlike the main character, is a mentally ‘sane’ woman who does not ‘hear voices’ – does not hesitate to contradict her own experience when confronted with the rest of the group. Since the diegetic source of the shout is not inscribed in the visual field, and remains unknown to the spectators, I would regard this vocal presence as liquid in the sense of disembodied, deprived of signification, and impossible to locate or classify. It possesses some of the qualities that Michel Chion ascribes to the ‘acousmêtre’: a voice without a visible body, originated off-screen and, for this reason, located neither inside nor outside the cinematic image.\(^{160}\)

All around Giuliana are visible signs of contamination and disease, from the spectre of polio to the yellow flag indicating that a quarantined ship has entered the harbour. Such encounters with pollution and its effect on the human body fill her with horror and fear. As Linda suggests that the ambulance has arrived to take the ill man who shouted, the association between disembodied voice and viral contagion is made explicit. In this scene, Antonioni’s use of off-screen sound endows the narrative with an uncanny sense of indefiniteness; at the same time, however, \emph{Il deserto rosso} presents its viewers with another type of acousmatic voice, which I would consider as a positive agent of mediation:

\[^{157}\text{Passage transcribed from film. ‘Who could have cried out?’}\]
\[^{158}\text{Pinkus, pp. 254-275 (p. 268).}\]
\[^{159}\text{See also Restivo, \emph{The Cinema of Economic Miracles}, p. 125.}\]
\[^{160}\text{Michel Chion, \emph{The Voice in Cinema}, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 18-21.}\]
the haunting melody that accompanies Giuliana’s fantasy on the Sardinian beach. In counteracting the noise pollution that dominates the estranged world of the factory, Cecilia Fusco’s hypnotic voice functions as a signifier for the purity of nature.\textsuperscript{161} The fact that it is not anchored to any precise body or position seems to suggest that it emanates from the landscape itself. This is an acousmatic presence that merges the animate with the inanimate, extending into an off-screen world that reveals and emphasises the leakiness of the frame. In discussing the powers that the \textit{acousmêtre} can be invested with, Chion proposes that the bodiless voice ‘takes us back to an archaic, original stage: of the first months of life or even before birth, during which the voice was everything and it was everywhere.’\textsuperscript{162} In this respect, the singing voice in the island sequence recalls the traditional music that Seta listens to while she burns the photographs of her former life in Lebanon; this kind of \textit{acousmêtre}, like Antonioni’s, expresses the yearning for a return to an impossible origin.

Egoyan employs the disembodied voice to reveal the abject content of the videos viewed by the censor and, more significantly, by Seta. Screams and moans coming from unframed diegetic video screens are not restricted to these moments, but provide a sort of acoustic leitmotif that recurs in many of the scenes shot inside the model home. For Wilson, they ‘create a web of amniotic, preverbal, and entrapping sound that cannot quite be grasped and so also cannot be expelled.’\textsuperscript{163} Hard-core pornography has leaked through the spatial symbol of melodrama – the family home – and invaded the psyche of its dwellers (as Hera’s nightmare also suggests). The uncanny apparition of the masturbing Peeping Tom further reinforces this point. It could be argued that, by hiding the film’s sexually explicit content, Egoyan places himself in the position of an adjuster/mediator, who evaluates pornography and suppresses it (at least visually) for us. Better still, the director’s choice makes the viewer aware of the fluid nature of these preverbal sounds, and thereby of the impossibility of any system of fixed rules being able to control the flow of pornographic material.

With regard to this, I wish to call attention to an essay written by John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis, ‘Aural Sex: The Female Orgasm in Popular Sound’, which analyses the proliferation of sounds of female sexual pleasure in the

\textsuperscript{161} Brunette, p. 106.
\textsuperscript{162} Chion, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{163} Wilson, \textit{Atom Egoyan}, p. 56.
world of pop music from the 1960s onwards. Albeit the vocalizations in *The Adjuster* sound more like screams of torture than pleasure, Egoyan's aural evocation of sadistic sex raises similar questions in terms of containment policies. According to the authors, aural representations of sexual ecstasy in pop songs can be easily allowed into public places that would otherwise forbid visual forms of pornography. As they elucidate:

In a scopophilic society in which one looks for ‘eyewitness’ accounts (as opposed to mere ‘hearsay’), what defines aural pornography? What is the legal status of non-language-based sexual sound? The pornographic is defined as that which is seen in images or written in language; in both senses, graphic = written. Thus, federal agencies and consumer advocates can easily police visual obscenity in video images and content obscenity in song lyrics, but they have a much more difficult time defining and prohibiting the use of sex sounds in popular music.\(^{164}\)

The leakage of hard-core sounds in *The Adjuster* represents a threat to the stability of the dominant order, notably because it is Khanjian’s character – the ‘female adjuster’, as Wilson calls her – who causes it to spread and infect the domestic sphere.\(^{165}\) At the end of section 1.1, I indicated that the directors’ muses emerge as a major conduit for thinking about how practices of mediation and phenomena of contamination are closely interwoven. If the regeneration of abject pornography is presented as the corollary of censorship's negotiation with public taste, then it is Hera who is endowed with the power to expose the fallibility of our institutionalised strategies of repression. Drawing on the theories of Mulvey, Gittings maintains that this not only raises interesting questions about woman's position in the domestic space; it also challenges conventional images of the mother as the original guarantor of privacy and moral decency proposed by classical Hollywood melodrama.\(^{166}\)

As Chion observes, the bodiless voice refers back to its counterpart: the voiceless body. Distinguishing between the concepts of ‘muteness’ (a physical inability to speak) and ‘mutism’ (a refusal for psychological reasons), Chion suggests that the function of silent characters is to elicit doubt: ‘[t]o encounter the mute is to encounter questions of identity, origin, desire.’ We might think of

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\(^{165}\) Wilson, ‘The Female Adjuster’, pp. 28-40 (p. 28).

\(^{166}\) Gittings, pp. 144-145.
them ‘as the place where the story’s crucial knowledge is lodged and which can never be wholly transmitted.’ Seta, who does speak English, is an isolated and marginalised character. Although her original trauma is left out of the narrative, it arguably adds a new level of meaning to the film. The historical references here are those of the Armenian diaspora, and later postcolonial displacements. The concept of ‘home’ has different resonances if we think in these terms, and so does Noah’s ‘ark’, which, in gathering people from varied backgrounds and of different sexual orientations, serves as a symbol for Canada’s acceptance of diversity. As Naficy notes, Egoyan’s cinematic universe is a network of mediations, substitutions, and adjustments; what Seta’s story demonstrates is that the homeland is another of its many missing referents: ‘[n]o house, home, or homeland exists. All that remains is the play of signifiers and signification.’

It would be incorrect, however, to say that Seta lacks a voice; in more than one scene, indeed, she speaks Armenian with her sister. This leads us to question the filmmaker’s incorporation of untranslated and unsubtitled foreign languages, an aspect he shares with Antonioni (an example of this is the impossible dialogue between Giuliana and the Turkish sailor at the end of Il deserto rosso). The function of the unsubtitled foreign language will be looked at in subsection 3.2.1; for the moment, I propose that such vocal incursions of otherness signify not only detachment and lack of communication, but also fluidity and resistance to boundaries. The very presence of an undecipherable code, in fact, makes us aware of the arbitrary nature of our own linguistic structures of mediation and signification.

There is another sound phenomenon that expresses the liquid, disruptive qualities of the voice in The Adjuster, even though it is not a manifestation of the acousmatic: it occurs when, as a consequence of Tyler’s sexual assault, Hera bursts out laughing and crying hysterically. As Wilson remarks, she is echoing her double, Mimi, who laughs with pleasure at the end of every erotic role-play she performs with Bubba. Here I suggest that Hera’s expression of disgust could be productively read in the context of Kristeva’s notion of abjection, developed in her book Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.

167 Chion, pp. 96-97.
168 Naficy, p. 181.
169 Wilson, Atom Egoyan, p. 57.
The theory of abjection speaks to many of the themes tackled in this thesis (I shall return to it in subsections 2.3.2 and 3.2.2). It provides a crucial theoretical basis for dealing with phenomena of pollution and defilement, especially as pertains to the disruption of bodily boundaries and identities. Kristeva calls abjection the process of rejecting, both mentally and physically, what is other to oneself, and constitutes a threat to one’s ‘clean and proper body’.¹⁷⁰ Neither subject nor object, the abject is what repels me, and cannot be assimilated: ‘[a] massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome.’¹⁷¹ The abject is what I violently expel in order to construct the frail borders of my own subjectivity, and develop a sense of ‘I’ as a unitary and discrete being. At once repulsive and seductive, the memories of the self that the abject evokes go back to an archaic world of pre-objectual, pre-nominal relationships, prior to the logic of separation, and prior to the subject’s entrance into the realm of paternal law:

If language, like culture, sets up a separation and, starting with discrete elements, concatenates an order, it does so precisely by repressing maternal authority and the corporeal mapping that abuts against them. It is then appropriate to ask what happens to such a repressed item when the legal, phallic, linguistic symbolic establishment does not carry out the separation in radical fashion – or else, more basically, when the speaking being attempts to think through its advent in order better to establish its effectiveness.¹⁷²

Unlike Sigmund Freud’s concept of the repressed, the abject is never discarded altogether, but continues to hover on the fragile edges of consciousness. A looming presence at the periphery of my own subjectivity, abjection is a danger I am constantly exposed to, and which assumes different and specific shapes: food loathing, filth, sin, or death.¹⁷³ To prevent contamination by phenomena of abjection, cultures have adopted remedies that are founded on logics of separation and difference: the Judeo-Christian tradition, for instance, places special emphasis on systems of abomination, and on the dichotomy between pure and impure.¹⁷⁴ This is where, for Kristeva, we encounter rituals that involve

separating, washing, banning, and not touching. Such ordering strategies arguably recall the fight against obscenity and ambivalence that takes place in *The Adjuster*: the abject is located in ambiguity, and triggered by what does not respect order, rules, and clear identities.\textsuperscript{175}

In the light of this, Hera’s reaction to Tyler’s obscene gesture is an act of expulsion that marks the overcoming of disgust: our attitude towards the abject, indeed, finds successful expression through laughing. Initially, she incites him to continue, enacting a tension between emotions of excitement and abhorrence. Subsequently, a flow of pornographic images is superimposed on her face as it convulses with laughter and spasms. Kristeva argues that ‘laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection’; to elucidate this, she turns to the fiction of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, focusing in particular on how it introduces the violent beauty of the horrified, ‘apocalyptic laughter’.\textsuperscript{176} As Wilson writes: ‘Hera’s disturbance enacts her release from the system the censors maintain.’\textsuperscript{177} If abjection is found in the duality of fascination and repulsion, then the sudden eruption of laughter in *The Adjuster* indicates an alternative way of dealing with this contradiction: instead of adopting defence mechanisms such as classification or repression, Hera’s reaction is a terrifying recognition of ambiguity and its untameable force. It interrupts language, yet brings to the foreground the liquid qualities of sound and voice, facing the unnameable abject through a radical act of physical rejection and discharge.

\subsection{1.3.3 Superimpositions and the Chromophobic Impulse}

Extensive literature exists on the subject of colour in *Il deserto rosso*; for this reason, the purpose of this subsection will be to concentrate specifically on its overtones of mediation and contamination, and to identify the points of contact with Egoyan’s use of colour in *The Adjuster*. Special emphasis will be put on Egoyan’s aesthetics, since his approach to colour has been far less studied than Antonioni’s.

\textsuperscript{175} Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{176} Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 8, p. 204.
\textsuperscript{177} Wilson, *Atom Egoyan*, p. 57.
In an interview he gave to Peter Harcourt in 1994, Egoyan described *The Adjuster* as his ‘most carefully colour co-ordinated film’.\(^{178}\) This is evident if we compare its excessive palette to the almost monochromatic one of *Speaking Parts*. Both interior and exterior locations contain vibrantly coloured elements, from the motel’s reddish-orange panels, to the floodlit football pitch where Mimi stages one of her erotic fantasies. The colour scheme of *The Adjuster* includes red, green, and blue. While yellow denotes hazardous pollution in *Il deserto rosso*, red participates in the spectacularization of obscenity in *The Adjuster*. Mimi’s elegant vermilion dress is correlated with her defiant and impudent sexuality, as is the one worn by Louise (Jacqueline Samuda), the maid, in the scene where we discover that she also works as a prostitute. The same colour, then, invades the model home through the clothes of Simon and those of the teddy bear. The presence of red in these opposing contexts signifies the uncanny sexualisation of the domestic space, and its contamination by hard-core. In *Il deserto rosso*, red assumes an important expressive function; during the hut sequence, it is used to suggest the characters’ agitation and erotic excitement. Commenting on the meaning of the title, Antonioni told Godard: “Desert” maybe because there aren’t very many oases left, “red” because of blood. The bleeding, living desert, full of the flesh of men.\(^{179}\)

Perhaps most unsettling is Egoyan’s use of blue light in the sequences shot inside the projection theatre (the same blue light figures prominently in *Exotica*). In ‘Giotto’s Joy’, Kristeva discusses Giotto’s use of blue in the frescoes of the Arena Chapel in Padua. She maintains that all colours – but especially those with short wavelengths, such as blue – have a ‘noncentered or decentering effect, lessening both object identification and phenomenal fixation.’\(^{180}\) Colour is even seen as having a relation with infancy: chromatic perception, Kristeva explains, precedes the identification of objects, which is made possible by centred vision. This implies that, potentially, all colours, but blue in particular (as the first to be perceived by the infant’s retina), act as a reminder of the fragile foundations of the self, engendering a moment of

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\(^{179}\) Quoted in Brunette, p. 97. The original title of the film, ‘Celeste e verde’ (‘Light blue and green’), established an even clearer link with colour. Antonioni decided to drop it because it was not ‘virile enough’ (Godard, p. 34).

unbecoming.\textsuperscript{181} If blue indicates undifferentiation, as Kristeva suggests, then its appearance in the Censor Board brings to the surface contradictions that are deeply embedded in the psychology of the censors, and in the classification act in itself.

In section 1.2, I claimed that the inclusion of bright industrial products within the \textit{mise-en-scène} of \textit{Il deserto rosso} and \textit{The Adjuster} serves as a shocking reminder of modernisation processes. Their excessive, intoxicating colours are clearly invested with the violent qualities of the modern experience. At the same time, both films are awash with clinical white surfaces, such as the sterile corridors in Corrado’s hotel, or the inside walls of Egoyan’s model home. Pure whiteness is related to scenarios of geographical rootlessness that reconfigure the concept of home in the context of an increasingly liquid, globalised milieu (see also subsection 3.2.2). There seem to be significant similarities in the colour strategies at work in \textit{Il deserto rosso} and \textit{The Adjuster}. What I wish to propose, in particular, is that Egoyan’s approach to colour is somewhat redolent of Antonioni’s propensity for chromatic dissonance and manipulation. Their cinematic worlds are not colourful – but \textit{coloured} – by virtue of a self-conscious use of colour as artifice and surface.

This is certainly true for Antonioni, who had trees, grass, and certain objects painted to alter their natural appearance. Following their visit to Giuliana’s shop, she and Corrado walk to a fruit vendor’s cart. The \textit{mise-en-scène} is highly desaturated, and the fruit displayed on the cart is tinted a dull grey. Giuliana is framed next to the cart, but, at the same time, her subjective view is incorporated within the image.\textsuperscript{182} This shows how \textit{Il deserto rosso} emphasises chromatic perception as a relational process between object and observer, rather than as an absolute fact.\textsuperscript{183} The mediating force of colours, their ability to reflect and influence people’s state of mind, is among the list of things that terrify Giuliana. In an interview, Antonioni made an interesting remark about the warning function of colours in the world of industry, which

\textsuperscript{181} Kristeva, ‘Giotto’s joy’, pp. 210-236 (p. 225).

\textsuperscript{182} Although not directly linked with colour, Egoyan adopts a similar strategy in the scenes where he uses his characters as objects and perceptual subjects simultaneously. Examples of this are the moment when Noah sees the Peeping Tom, and the one in which Bubba watches Mimi’s role-play on the football pitch. As in Antonioni’s fruit cart sequence, we witness a contamination between subjective and objective points of view. In turning their back on us, Noah and Bubba act as agents of mediation, doubling the viewer’s position on screen, and implicitly revealing the voyeurism inscribed in cinematic spectatorship.

\textsuperscript{183} Marcus, p. 204.
echoes the protagonist’s conceptualisation of colour as danger, and highlights its symbolic value (in melodrama, the orchestration of colour and lighting provides privileged information about the characters’ inner emotional states). In case of rupture or malfunctioning of a pipe, the director notes, it is vital to know what kind of substance it contains: bright colours are used precisely for this purpose.\textsuperscript{184} Basically, this is another way of divorcing colour from the organic.

As these examples indicate, Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s aesthetics seem to express a persistent preoccupation with colour as a source of threat. In his investigation into chromophobic drives in Western culture, David Batchelor maintains that colour is commonly perceived as ‘dangerous’, that ‘[i]t is a drug, a loss of consciousness, a kind of blindness’ resulting in a ‘loss of focus, of identity, of self.’\textsuperscript{185} ‘[S]ystematically marginalized, reviled, diminished and degraded’, colour is routinely regarded as both ‘dangerous’ and ‘trivial’, ‘sinister’ and ‘superficial’. Chromophobia, for Batchelor, is a fear of contamination and corruption that manifests itself in an impulse to downgrade colour and to purge it from the sphere of culture. This can be accomplished in two different ways: either by making colour ‘the property of some “foreign” body – usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological’, or by relegating it to ‘the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic.’\textsuperscript{186} The marginalisation of colour as a trivial fact, in particular, is relevant to the purposes of this analysis. ‘If colour is cosmetic’, Batchelor writes, ‘it is added to the surface of things […]. It does not have a place within things; it is an afterthought; it can be rubbed off’ (In Latin, he reminds us, the term color is semantically related to ‘covering’ or ‘concealing’).\textsuperscript{187} Antonioni’s desire to control and alter colour contributes to the film’s engagement with strategies of mediation: the chromatic experience has become arbitrary, antirealist, to use Batchelor’s words – ‘mere make-up’. Though less literally, a sense of colour as adornment or appearance pervades \textit{The Adjuster}, as well. Egoyan may not go so far as to paint the elements of the \textit{mise-en-scène}, but \textit{The Adjuster} gives the impression that a cosmetic, illusory layer or patina of colour has been applied to the surface of things. To put it in

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{184} Quoted in Paul Coates, \textit{Cinema and Colour: The Saturated Image} (London: Palgrave Macmillan on behalf of the British Film Institute, 2010), p. 74.
\textsuperscript{186} Batchelor, pp. 22-23.
\textsuperscript{187} Batchelor, p. 52. See also Michiel de Vaan, \textit{Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the Other Italic Languages} (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008), p. 126.
\end{footnotesize}
another way, colour is revealed as pure artifice; it involves the imposition of a
 veil, a thin layer of skin, whose aim is to confuse, fake, and cover up. This is
 mirrored, I suggest, by Egoyan’s use of intense lighting, from the fluorescent
 lamps that illuminate Bubba’s cinematographic set, to the blue lights inside the
 projection theatre. In the motel rooms, lighting reflects the warm colours of the
 walls; this results in the characters’ faces being slightly tinged with orange hues.
 Lastly, and most crucially, I would call attention to the two scenes of The
 Adjuster in which slides are projected onto Mimi’s and Hera’s bodies (figure
 1.c). The unsettling effect of these superimpositions is indicative of how, not
 unlike Antonioni, Egoyan favours a visual style of surfaces, where everything is
 counterfeited, and colour does not ‘belong’ to the objects on screen. It is rather
 applied to them. The following passage from Batchelor’s Chromophobia can
 help elucidate this point:

 If surface veils depth, if appearance masks essence, then make-up
 masks a mask, veils a veil, disguises a disguise. It is not simply a
 deception; it is a double deception. It is a surface on a surface, and
 thus even farther from substance than ‘true’ appearance. How things
 appear is one thing; how things appear to appear is another. Colour
 is a double illusion, a double deception.188

 If this, as I argue, is the auteurs’ main point of contact in terms of colour
 strategies, then there is also a fundamental difference that must be highlighted.
 In the sequence of Giuliana’s fantasy, colour is presented without any form of
 distortion or manipulation: the image is not coloured – but colourful. Egoyan
 similarly counteracts the illusion of chromatic excess, but in a different way:
 instead of exploiting the full potential of natural colour, he enacts its radical
 suppression via the sombre, muted tones of the burnt house. Thus, Arianne’s
 release from the world of commodities is also a release from the world of
 colours (as her eloquent black coat suggests). Significantly, the faded images
 from Seta’s traumatic past are in black and white, too. The presence of Bubba,
 by contrast, is signalled by a number of mysterious and dazzling objects; one
 could mention, for instance, the electric blue jackets he distributes to the
 Renders, an act with strong Eucharistic resonances.189

 188 Batchelor, p. 54.
 189 The Adjuster, DVD commentary by Egoyan.
Sitney has suggested that the sudden shift of colour tones in Antonioni’s island sequence takes us back to a condition of pre-puberty, disrupted by the girl’s sexual awakening (the arrival of the phantom ship). This view puts emphasis on the link between sexuality and pollution, and explains Giuliana’s malaise in terms of sexual repression.\textsuperscript{190} A different reading is offered by Dalle Vacche, who praises Antonioni’s capacity to expand our understanding of colour between pictorial stillness and cinematic movement.\textsuperscript{191} Dalle Vacche also posits a key opposition between architecture, which she considers as ‘masculine’, and painting, which she describes as ‘feminine’.\textsuperscript{192} It is through his innovative use of colour, as well as the direction of Vitti, that Antonioni gains access to this ‘feminine’ space of pictorial abstraction.\textsuperscript{193} As Paul Coates has remarked, however, Dalle Vacche’s critical framework fails to take into account the destabilisation of boundaries and polarities that permeates Antonioni’s visual style. We cannot, in other words, postulate a clear division between feminine and masculine realms, nor between painting and architecture. It is more plausible that these regimes ‘contaminate one another’: as observed in section 1.2, blue steel bars and blinding white walls have already entered the traditionally feminine domestic space. Likewise, despite being run by men, the factory is depicted as a combination of pictorial and architectural elements.\textsuperscript{194}

Discourses on colour challenge us to reappraise Antonioni’s cinema moving beyond essentialist paradigms and conventional markers of gender. This methodological standpoint, in fact, fails to capture the way in which his films can give us new insights into the complexities and contradictions of modernity. Coates notices that, with the exception of Giuliana’s fantasy, \textit{Il deserto rosso} does not attempt to segregate dark, muted shades from vibrant ones. It rather thrives on their reciprocal interplay.\textsuperscript{195} In my view, the boundary between artificial and natural colours is not so firmly established, either. Most critical literature interprets the island as a pure and uncontaminated natural environment; nevertheless, I wish to call attention to the unusual coral-pink tint of the sand, a particularity of the ‘pink beach’ on the Sardinian Isle of Budelli. Antonioni’s choice of location introduces a suggestive element of dissonance,

\textsuperscript{190} Sitney, p. 216.
\textsuperscript{191} Dalle Vacche, pp. 43-80 (p. 79).
\textsuperscript{192} Dalle Vacche, pp. 43-80 (p. 65).
\textsuperscript{193} Dalle Vacche, pp. 43-80 (p. 51).
\textsuperscript{194} Coates, pp. 74-75.
\textsuperscript{195} Coates, p. 75.
which I would read as an allusion to the deceptive qualities of colour per se. The fact that *Il deserto rosso* presents the grey fruit as real and the pink beach as an imaginative projection troubles the very possibility of realism by making implausible worlds plausible, and vice versa. However visionary it might seem, the pink surface of the beach is its real ‘skin’: Antonioni may be offering us a faithful representation here, but it is also a very improbable one.

The frameworks of liquid modernity and abjection have allowed me to explore how *Il deserto rosso* and *The Adjuster* position themselves in relation to various aspects of the modern condition. Egoyan’s stance towards modernity, as we have seen, is profoundly embedded in a dimension of fluidity and ambivalence. The encounter with abject pornography, in particular, is indicative of the fragile nature of all boundaries and classification systems. As regards Antonioni, in suggesting that the duality between solid and liquid stages of development permeates *Il deserto rosso*’s deep structure, I called attention to how this film presciently embraces important features associated with Bauman’s paradigm. The directors’ techniques, and the emphasis that they place on certain cinematographic elements, enabled a formalist reading of mediation and contamination, which also addressed discourses on materialism and processes of signification in film.
Chapter Two
Capturing What Vanishes: *Blow-Up* and *Speaking Parts*

Obviously a photograph of an earthquake, or of Garbo, is not an earthquake happening (fortunately), or Garbo in the flesh (unfortunately). But this is not very informative. And, moreover, it is not less paradoxical or false to hold up a photograph of Garbo and say, 'That is not Garbo,' [...].

Stanley Cavell

2.1 The Viral Force of Images

‘I lost my objectivity’ – admits one character of Egoyan’s *Speaking Parts* (1989) after having experienced the thrill of handling a video camera for the first time. One trait that this film shares with Antonioni’s biggest critical and commercial success – *Blow-Up* (1966) – is the awareness that the more our lives become saturated with images, the more essential it is to maintain a certain suspicion about what we view. This introductory section aims to demonstrate that *Blow-Up* and *Speaking Parts* were born out of a sense of disillusionment with claims of objectivity and veracity, which refers to different but comparable phases in media history. The intention behind this juxtaposition is to reveal that Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s films are similar in terms of how they ward off the danger of excessive belief in visual technology’s ability to capture, preserve, and give meaning to the most fleeting events in one’s life.

I shall begin by providing a recapitulation of the films’ plots, touching in particular on the questions relevant to the theoretical analysis to follow. This will allow for a brief contextualisation of the technologies in question – photography and video – as well as for a definition of the qualities of media critique that inform the directors’ artistic discourses. By bringing *Blow-Up* and *Speaking Parts* into dialogue with one another, I can better investigate the critical commentary on the contemporary world that they formulate: if *Il deserto rosso*

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depicts a society on the verge of becoming post-industrial, here the transition from solid to liquid is at a more advanced stage of development. It is against a backdrop of decline of universal human categories (gender, race, and, most notably, nature) that my discussion will largely unfold. A broad theoretical framework of posthumanism, ranging from the theories of Haraway to those of Braidotti, will underpin the close textual analysis conducted in the following sections. As a movement that imagines radical transformations of the human form, posthumanism will prove useful in disentangling the complex interrelations between body, technology, and culture that the two films deploy. This approach shall enable me to delve further into the points of contact between mediation and contamination, whilst shedding new light on the fusion of human and non-human factors in Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s oeuvres. On the one hand, it must be recognised that the posthuman condition has already been used as a critical frame of reference for studies on Speaking Parts (see subsection 2.2.1). On the other, however, this is a perspective that can open up a productive space for reflection in which canonical works such as Antonioni’s Blow-Up are creatively revisited, and read beyond the paradigm of dominant methodological discourses.

Set in the Swinging London of the 1960s, Blow-Up is the first feature film that Antonioni shot in English, outside Italy. The importance of London in the 1960s cultural scene has been widely acknowledged, and there are several studies on Blow-Up that focus on the specificities of its artistic milieu. Among these, it is necessary to mention the contribution of David Allan Mellor, which reconstructs the incorporation in the film of certain practices and sensibilities belonging to British visual artists of that time: painter Ian Stephenson, from whom executive producer Pierre Rouve commissioned the abstract paintings shown in the artist’s studio; and photojournalist Don McCullin, creator of the protagonist’s social reportage. Blow-Up centres on a successful fashion photographer (David Hemmings), unnamed in the film but referred to as

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‘Thomas’ in the screenplay, whom Antonioni modelled on British Vogue magazine’s contributor and freelance photographer David Bailey. Besides photographing glamorous models in his avant-garde studio, amongst whom is fashion icon Veruschka, Thomas is preparing a photobook on contemporary London, which includes realistic images of urban poverty and deprived people. Wandering in a park in search for inspiring subjects, he comes across a couple whose romantic attitude attracts his attention, and secretly takes snapshots of their encounter. As the woman, Jane (Vanessa Redgrave), notices the uninvited spectator, she angrily demands that he hand the roll of film over to her. Deaf to her pleas, Thomas becomes increasingly intrigued by what seemed to be an ordinary and banal episode. The narrative here gives way to a series of secondary events, which are not directly linked with the central plot. Among them are the visit to an antique store, and the pointless purchase of a propeller. Back in his studio, Thomas finds the woman again. She begs for the roll of film, and even offers sexual favours in order to obtain it. The photographer gives her a different film, and starts to develop the original exposures.

Snapshots, enlargements, and enlargements of enlargements are hung in sequence on the walls of Thomas’s studio. It becomes clear that the protagonist’s pursuit of photographic evidence and unmediated truth depends, paradoxically enough, on his role as mediator. Each shot is carefully placed under scrutiny: he determines which sections to magnify, and in which order to arrange them. The photographer regards himself as a faithful and neutral interpreter of reality, but, for the first time in his life, he is confronted with an event that is unfaithful to him and his camera. The initial sequence of textual interventions leads Thomas to believe that he can discern a gunman in the bushes, and therefore, that he has prevented a murder from happening. At this point, the main plot line is temporarily suspended again: two young aspiring models (Jane Birkin and Gillian Hills) break into his studio, and the three of them end up playing half-naked on lilac background paper. Following a second series of enlargements, the grainy texture of the image reveals the presence of a corpse under the bushes. Thomas rushes to the park that night, without his camera, and finds the dead body of the man who embraced the woman. He then goes into his neighbours’ house, and watches them as they make love. In the meantime, all his photographs and negatives have been stolen, except for the last blown-up print. When Thomas’s neighbour, Patricia (Sarah Miles), sees
it, she suggests that it looks like one of Bill’s abstract paintings (the character of the painter, played by John Castle, is inspired by Stephenson himself).

In another brief narrative interlude, we see the photographer entering a building where The Yardbirds are performing. As one band member smashes his guitar, Thomas fights to grab its broken neck as a trophy, only to get rid of it a few moments later. He then joins the decadent party that is taking place at his editor’s apartment (Ron, played by Peter Bowles): surrounded by statues and antique furniture, people smoke drugs, and converse in a semi-conscious state. Thomas gets drunk and falls asleep. In daylight, he returns to the park, this time with his camera: there is nothing under the bushes. He sees a group of mimes, who we already saw at the beginning of the film. They are playing a tennis game with imaginary balls and rackets. Antonioni’s camera follows the movements of the non-existent ball, and we start hearing its sound as it bounces from one racket to another. When the ball flies over the fence, Thomas collects it, and throws it back, so that they can continue the game. Framed in a long, high-angle shot, the figure of the photographer disappears in the grass, whose dense, hyperreal pigmentation, like that of the many paths and tarmac roads of the film, was artificially enhanced by adding emulsion paint to its surface.

Moving onwards, I shall now shift my focus to the plot of Speaking Parts. While Chapter One proposed the directors’ muses and various formal aspects as possible conduits for thinking about dynamics of mediation and contamination in Il deserto rosso and The Adjuster, here the main factor linking Blow-Up and Speaking Parts resides in the image itself – photographic for Antonioni; video for Egoyan. More specifically, I contend that the filmmakers’ reconfigurations of technologies of vision carry with them an element of infectiousness, which, as I will show, is partially explicable in terms of a viral, uncontrollable spreading of mediated images. For this reason, a scenario of contagiousness and mortality, conceived of in a range of guises and in multiple contexts, will progressively emerge as a pivotal element of my critical approach in the present chapter.

Romney has provided a succinct definition of Egoyan’s third feature film: Speaking Parts is the director’s ‘most concerted speculation on the seductions
of the screen and the pleasures and pains of looking’. Entirely shot in a Toronto hotel, *Speaking Parts* begins with a series of intercut sequences with no diegetic sound, connected with one another by Mychael Danna’s minimalist soundtrack. We see a woman entering a cemetery to watch archive footage of a young man, then another woman sitting still, as if hypnotised by her television screen. At some point, Egoyan’s camera pans to the diegetic monitor, initiating a forward movement that is starkly reminiscent of the process of photographic enlargement in *Blow-Up*. Initially, viewers were led to think that the piano music was diegetic, coming from the classical recital on the woman’s screen. As the camera zooms in, however, suturing our gaze to the grainy close-up of a young man in the audience, it becomes clear that the source of sound is non-diegetic. This is Lance (Michael McManus), a hotel housekeeper and aspiring actor, who works as an extra in films and is desperately seeking a way out of anonymity: his first speaking part.

In her recent piece on *Blow-Up*, Nardelli has suggested that the protagonist’s enlargements articulate the intrinsic ‘plurality of photography’ along two different axes: horizontally, in the sense of the physical alignment of the photographs on the wall; and vertically, as a movement *within* the individual photograph. What Nardelli calls ‘plurality’ I would refer to as contamination, arguing for an extension of her critical discourse to embrace the video image in Egoyan’s film. This redefinition will allow me to rethink such processes in a way that does not limit itself to examining the exponential growth of images, but rather takes this as a point of departure. What interests me most is how such an abundance of viewing contexts points to the shifting boundaries of the body, and shapes human involvement with technology. This constitutes the main line of inquiry in the present chapter: the quantitative proliferation of reproduction technologies, reflected in the *mise-en-scène* of both films, lays bare the viral force governing our use and abuse of the media. A comparative analysis in terms of mediation and contamination can be useful in unifying discourses on visual culture and corporeality, and ultimately, in revealing how strongly our representational practices are coupled with the human paradigm.

Nardelli’s scholarship informs another central aspect of my discussion: by noting that the constitutive plurality of photography also deploys on a vertical

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5 Romney, p. 61.
vector, she draws attention to that liminal space in which the visual granularity of the enlarged picture obliterates its own object by reaching the realm of the non-figurative. This sense of physical disintegration of the image, which will be explored as a phenomenon of contamination in section 2.3, can be arguably extended to the pixelated video surface of Lance’s close-up at the beginning of *Speaking Parts*.

As the image gives way to the grain, the potential seriality of even a single photograph is brought into relief. In its potential to generate further photographs from ‘inside’ itself, the individual photograph opens onto plurality by implying another which will be after or next to it, but also, logically, within it.

Returning to storyline of Egoyan’s film, the character whose gaze is sutured to the television image is Lisa (Arsinée Khanjian), a solitary woman who works as a housekeeper. She is enamoured of Lance, but he does not return her love, and is somewhat annoyed at her attentions. She rents all the videotapes in which he silently figures in the background, and watches them over and over again. Meanwhile, we discover that Lance prostitutes himself to the hotel guests, on the instructions of the authoritative hotel manager, referred to as the Housekeeper (Patricia Collins) in the screenplay. The story of Lance and Lisa intersects with that of Clara (Gabrielle Rose), an academic who has written an autobiographical screenplay that retells how her beloved brother, Clarence, died while donating a lung to save her life. Clara repeatedly visits the video mausoleum, where she obsessively watches a home video of her brother. Like Lisa, she is engulfed in an imaginary love that has turned in the adoration of an

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7 Nardelli, pp. 185-205 (p. 200).
8 The relationship between Antonioni and painting continues to be a topic of critical interest, as recently demonstrated by the exhibition held in Ferrara, at Palazzo dei Diamanti, from March to June 2013: Lo sguardo di Michelangelo. Antonioni e le arti. With regard to this, I wish to call attention to the similarities between the process of photographic enlargement in *Blow-Up* and the series of portraits and self-portraits that Chuck Close, a leading figure in the photorealist movement, made in the 1970s. Close’s working process consisted in the creation of a large-format Polaroid of a human face, subsequently gridded and transferred square by square onto a larger canvas. As Kirk Varnedoe suggests, his art is the result of a delicate balance between ‘the autonomy of abstract marks and the overall force of resemblance and recognition.’ Kirk Varnedoe, ‘Chuck Close Then and Now’, in *Chuck Close*, ed. by Robert Storr (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), pp. 61-70 (p. 65). An analogy between Close’s paintings and the voyeurism evoked by Egoyan’s work has already been advanced by William F. Van Wert, who focuses in particular on the filmmaker’s installation with Julião Sarmento at the 2001 Venice Biennale, entitled *Close*. William F. Van Wert, ‘*Close*: Voyeurism and the Idea of the Baroque’, in *Image and Territory*, ed. by Tschofen and Burwell, pp. 295-305 (p. 303).
9 Nardelli, pp. 185-205 (p. 200).
Clara and the rest of the production team are staying at the hotel where both Lance and Lisa work. Clara auditions Lance, and feels attracted to him on account of his alleged physical resemblance to Clarence. Once the autocratic Producer (David Hemblen) has given his consent via teleconference, she casts him in the film. Clara and Lance begin an affair, tinged with vaguely incestuous overtones, but we never see any expression of physical intimacy between them.

In the hyper-mediated world of Speaking Parts, love is the ultimate example of failed mediation, in the sense that it does not connect but separates, turning into narcissism and masturbation. The equation between viewer and voyeur, as we have seen, occurs also for Thomas in Blow-Up: virtual sex and scopophilic structures of looking have become substitutes for physical encounters. The scene in which Lance and Clara masturbate while watching each other on teleconference monitors demonstrates the extent to which sexuality has come to be disembodied, solipsistic, and mediated by technological devices, whether it be a video camera or a telephone (as happens in the earlier Family Viewing).

The aesthetic regime imposed by the new media is being presented as a complex web of power, danger, and physical pleasure. With regard to this, Ron Burnett argues that ‘[t]his metaphor of the body in relation to the image, the body taking the image into itself and defining its sexuality in terms of the image, puts into question the very nature of the body itself. Where are the boundaries?’

In a video rental shop, Lisa meets Eddy (Tony Nardi), a fervent video maker who films everything, from weddings to private orgies. Lisa insists on helping him out, but her video interview of the Producer’s assistant, Trish (Jacqueline Samuda), on her wedding day results in a sequence of upsetting questions that infuriates the groom, Ronnie (Peter Krantz). In the meantime, the Producer, based in an unspecified remote location, adjusts Clara’s script against her will: he requires that the story be told in a televisual talk show format, and that Clara’s fictional character be changed from female to male.

Death breaks into the scene as one hotel guest, who remains invisible and unsexed throughout the whole film, commits suicide. The guest, previously labelled as ‘special’, was heard crying in the shower by Lisa, who did not

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intervene. From this moment on, any realist foundation disappears. Lance and the Housekeeper invite Lisa to join them in the video image, whose virtual space is reconfigured as a realm of rottenness and depravity by the presence of the guest’s corpse in the background. *Speaking Parts* reaches its narrative climax in a phantasmagorical intercutting of video sequences that revolve around a surreal staging of the talk show. We see the Producer as a television host, guiding a fake discussion on organ transplantation; then Lance announcing his decision to donate a lung to his brother; and eventually, a dying Ronnie in hospital. Clarence’s mausoleum video has now changed to include Clara herself, in what looks like a macabre prelude to the following scene: standing up among the talk show audience, she points a gun at her head, until Lance screams ‘No!’ The film’s denouement marks a return to more realist forms. Lance visits Lisa, and reaches out to her in silence. Their embracing bodies finally merge into one in silhouette.

*Blow-Up* and *Speaking Parts* enter into dialogue with the predominant reproduction technology of their time. Nardelli’s reading of Antonioni’s film emphasises the technological innovations in photographic production that occurred in the early 1960s; these, she argues, resulted in an enhancement of the intrinsic qualities of ‘plurality’ of the medium.\(^{11}\) Specifically, she reminds us that *Blow-Up* unfolds against a cultural backdrop in which cameras were being made at lower costs and in greater numbers than ever before. This contributed significantly to their diffusion, and to what Nardelli refers to as ‘the great photographic “boom”’ of the 1960s (here she is actually borrowing an expression coined by photographers Martin Parr and Gerry Badger).\(^{12}\) The point is made that during the late 1950s and early 1960s, at a time when photography was consolidating itself as an art form, there was an effort to manufacture simpler and more compact cameras that could be used by anybody. This led to the rise of 35mm cameras, as well as to the complete transition from plate to roll film in professional photography. Such revolutionary advances in the history of the medium are underlined also by Patrick Maynard, who remarks that the standardised production of new, simplified equipment made it increasingly easy and fast to take pictures, thereby fostering the development of mass amateur

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\(^{11}\) Nardelli, pp. 185-205 (p. 192).
\(^{12}\) Nardelli, pp. 185-205 (pp. 188-189).
photography. Thomas’s rapid and seductive movements during the fashion shoot of Veruschka, for instance, were made possible by his use of the then popular Nikon F, a small hand-held camera capable to capture several frames per second.

One other aspect should be pointed out in relation to the historical context of photography in the 1960s: as Carey Harrison suggested in a *Sight and Sound* article published in 1967, *Blow-Up* was released into a climate of ‘recent scrutiny of photographic evidence in the Kennedy assassination’. It is plausible to suppose that the protagonist’s crisis of interpretation is indicative of a contemporary concern about how deceptive information technologies can be. Thomas believes his photographs adhere to the truth, but the disappearance of the corpse in the park demonstrates that his means of mediation and his modes of perception are equally fallible.

Romney’s study locates Egoyan’s cinema ‘in the vanguard of a trend in mainstream cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, a wave of debate on video as a tool of consciousness.’ Antonioni, Romney reminds us, had already experimented with video as a medium in the early 1980s, with *Il mistero di Oberwald* (1981). Yet the pioneering spirit of films like *Family Viewing* and *Speaking Parts*, where video technology is totally assimilated into everyday domestic life, is due to the fact that it is only during the mid-1980s that video began to be regarded as a subject in its own right. Egoyan’s preoccupation with the ambivalence of the media is one of the traits that led several scholars to see his work as the expression of a distinctively Canadian sensibility. This perspective is adopted, for instance, by Harcourt: referring to his fellow Canadians, he asserts that ‘[g]rowing up saturated with images of the United States, we have a special problem in distinguishing between what is imaginary and what is real.’ As Pevere suggests, one might argue that Egoyan’s critical stance on the video image belongs to a long tradition of epistemological uncertainty that is deeply ingrained in the Canadian cultural context, and includes names as diverse as media theorist McLuhan, experimental filmmaker

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14 Nardelli, pp. 185-205 (p. 189).
16 Romney, p. 3.
17 Romney, p. 3.
18 Peter Harcourt, ‘Imaginary Images: An Examination of Atom Egoyan’s Films’, *Film Quarterly*, 48.3 (Spring 1995), 2-14 (p. 6).
Michael Snow, and pianist Glenn Gould.\textsuperscript{19} Several Anglo-Canadian directors – and especially those of the Toronto New Wave – have shown a strong interest for mediating technologies in general.\textsuperscript{20} The most important intertextual reference here is certainly \textit{Videodrome} (1983): it is no coincidence that David Cronenberg’s radical rendition of the ‘New Flesh’ (the fusion of the organic with the mechanical, of biological life with representational forms) has been put into dialogue with Egoyan’s dystopian universes so often.\textsuperscript{21}

The director of \textit{Speaking Parts} has indeed recognised the hallucinatory world of \textit{Videodrome} as having exerted a major influence upon his oeuvre.\textsuperscript{22} Despite this, and despite acknowledging a significant common ground between the two Canadian filmmakers, this chapter will allow some elements of discontinuity between them to emerge. A comparison of Egoyan and Antonioni, in fact, will not only reveal the artistic legacy of the latter in a transnational sense, but also encourage a rethinking of Egoyan’s approach to the media from the vantage point of his connection to a tradition of European auteur cinema. As illustrated in the Introduction, he was extremely familiar with this. Therefore, whilst accepting Egoyan’s affiliation to the Canadian cultural context, I would suggest that his films can be also located within a transnational tendency that questions the impact of image recording technologies at a time when video home systems were entering a process of intense proliferation (most notably in the North American markets). Indeed, as Romney observes, the director’s early works are the forerunners of a series of cinematic investigations into the challenges and pitfalls of video that definitely transcends the borders of the Canadian territory. Among these are Haneke’s \textit{Benny’s Video} (1992) and \textit{Funny Games} (1997); Steven Soderbergh’s \textit{sex, lies, and videotape} (1989); and Wenders’s documentary film \textit{Notebook on Cities and Clothes} (1989), to

\textsuperscript{20} See also Desbarats, pp. 9-32 (pp. 10-14). The breakthrough of the young generation of filmmakers that formed the Toronto New Wave came in 1987, when Patricia Rozema’s film \textit{I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing} won the Prix de la Jeunesse at the Cannes Film Festival. In the same year, Wenders was so impressed by Egoyan’s \textit{Family Viewing} that, when his \textit{Wings of Desire} was awarded a prize at the Montreal’s Festival du Nouveau Cinéma, he publicly reassigned it to the Canadian director.
\textsuperscript{21} See, for instance, Latham, pp. 171-179 (pp. 173-177); Romney, pp. 11-12; and Desbarats, pp. 9-32 (p. 11).
which I will turn later in this chapter.\textsuperscript{23}  

The final part of this section is concerned with demonstrating that the modes of proliferation specific to photography in the 1960s are comparable with those of video technology in the 1980s. In order to do so, I will draw on Roy Armes’s study, which looks at the historical and social context in which the medium in question originated and developed.\textsuperscript{24} Armes’s historicising discourse demands that video should be seen, rather than as an isolated phenomenon, as part of a technological continuum. Not unlike its predecessors (such as radio, photography, film, and the tape-recorder), video is an eclectic and versatile audio-visual medium that creates an illusion of neutrality, and presents itself as capable of offering an unmediated reproduction of the world.\textsuperscript{25} In origin, video was merely a recording device that functioned as a supplement to television. In the late 1970s and 1980s, with the advent of more sophisticated systems for video production, consumers began to gain access to shooting and editing facilities.\textsuperscript{26} As a result, the 1980s were marked by an extraordinary explosion in demands for the videocassette recorder: the improved equipment formed the new focus of domestic life, and video cameras supplanted still photography for the recording of private ceremonies and family events.\textsuperscript{27}

Such a process of transformation in the economics of the medium would leave a recognisable imprint on Egoyan’s early films, and especially on \textit{Speaking Parts}, where the credibility attributed to recorded sound and images poses a serious danger: that of confusing reality with its replicas. Solipsism is a possible corollary of the video image; in \textit{Speaking Parts}, as well as in \textit{Blow-Up}, the act of watching images is mainly presented as an individual pleasure. As Armes writes, video technology is ‘symptomatic of the public role given to images in a capitalist society: it records aspects of the surface of life, but it embellishes, prettifies, as it records.’\textsuperscript{28} We may be used to thinking of these practices of mediation as something neutral, unproblematic, and fundamentally safe. The aim of this chapter is to identify how the paired films question this preconception. What strategies do they employ to render the image as a source of contamination and threat?

\textsuperscript{23} Romney, pp. 3-4.  
\textsuperscript{25} Armes, p. 152.  
\textsuperscript{26} Armes, p. 128-129.  
\textsuperscript{27} Armes, p. 156-158.  
\textsuperscript{28} Armes, p. 197.
Positing the viral force of recorded images enabled me, at one level, to contextualise the qualities of suspicion about the media that the directors’ artistic discourses are profoundly invested with. As shown above, *Blow-Up* and *Speaking Parts* can be productively positioned against the background of an unprecedented quantitative spreading of the media in question. This kind of abundance, however, represents only one possible way of looking at the intersection of themes of mediation and contamination here. In the next part of my discussion, I shall use contagion as a conceptual metaphor to shed light on the artificiality of the nature/culture divide in Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s films.

2.2 Dismantling the Integrity of the Body

An important aspect of my research is the intention to explore technological mediation in its cinematic or explicitly meta-cinematic forms, as well as in other often neglected variants: chemical, industrial, wearable, and medical. This is in conformity with McLuhan’s account of the media as extensions of the human being, proposed in his milestone book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Men.*\(^\text{29}\) My approach is justified by the argument that an analysis of subsidiary practices of mediation can offer new insights into the films’ key concerns. Additionally, this perspective may contribute towards filling a void in existing scholarship on *Blow-Up* and *Speaking Parts*, since its primary preoccupation has generally been with technologies of vision. One of the main purposes of this section is therefore to examine the confluence of themes of mediation and contamination from the vantage point of clothes, and, more precisely, of Entwistle’s notion of the ‘fashioned body’.\(^\text{30}\) Do they, against a backdrop of instability in which physical boundaries have become increasingly fluid, play a part in the reciprocal imbrication of the human and the technological? How are practices of dress entwined with major manifestations of the posthuman?

Section 2.2 takes as its point of departure the fact that Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s films depict a world in which the integrity of the body has been dismantled. Posthuman and cyberfeminist theories will allow me to frame varied

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scenarios of renegotiations of bodily boundaries, whilst shedding light on the most prescient aspects of the directors’ artistic discourses. Besides clothing, I am going to address the motif of organ transplantation, which represents a pertinent but overlooked platform for interrogating practices of mediation and phenomena of contamination in Speaking Parts. In section 2.3, I will return to questions about the nature of the image.

2.2.1 ‘So… Intimate’: Posthuman Renegotiations of Boundaries

As Antonioni explained to Godard, Il deserto rosso does not look at modernity with nostalgic feelings for a primitive, pre-industrial past; nor does it condemn or demonise technological progress as such:

> It is too easy to say, as some critics have, that I am accusing the world of industry, factories, etc. of turning the people who live there into neurotics. My intention [...] was to point out the beauty in this world, where even the factories have an extraordinary aesthetic beauty. A line of factories, with their chimneys silhouetted on the skyline, seem to me much more beautiful than a line of trees which one has seen so often that it has become monotonous, to such an extent that we don’t even look any more.\(^{31}\)

This quote sets the mood for the next phase in my discussion, where I will attempt to move beyond established critical perspectives on the director of ‘alienation’ by pointing out the aspects of his oeuvre that speak directly to the posthuman condition. The aim of the present subsection is to frame a broad overview of posthuman theories and feminism which have a relative resonance with Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s films. This will enable me to explore how the filmmakers’ attention to varied strategies of mediation engenders phenomena of contamination between the organic and the technological. The dialectics of intimacy and distance that this reciprocal encounter articulates will be analysed in terms of renunciation of the body as a whole. Therefore, before addressing Entwistle’s concept of the ‘fashioned body’ in all of its senses, I will open up a discursive space motivating my use of posthumanism and cyberfeminism as theoretical frames of reference. An explanation that engages with some existing relevant studies on Speaking Parts will lead to interesting reflections on gender

\(^{31}\) Godard, p. 31.
in relation to technology. More importantly, it will provide the rationale for viewing practices of dress as an example of posthuman consciousness in *Blow-Up* (see subsections 2.2.2 and 2.2.3).

I would begin by noting that, as far as *Speaking Parts* is concerned, the fusion of human consciousness and video has already been employed as a contextual framework of analysis. Rob Latham has proposed a reading of Egoyan’s film in relation to *Videodrome*, in which he theorises the relevance of conceptual models of ‘invasion, colonization, and occupation’ to describe the incursions of the non-human into the human occurring in an image culture. Latham, however, sees the two films as enacting typically posthuman concerns in a quite different manner: while *Speaking Parts* represents ‘a humanistic critique of technology’s unspeakable contamination of desire’, *Videodrome* invokes a real cyborg fusion between human flesh and video machinery, promising a sort of new carnal alliance between them.\(^{32}\) I do not intend to extend on this comparison much further, but mentioning it can be useful to understand how, according to some critics, Egoyan’s most dystopian film is not as radical as others that preceded it. From Latham’s point of view, a humanist, rather than posthuman, perspective animates *Speaking Parts*.\(^{33}\) To clarify this point better, it might be useful to cite what Neil Badmington writes about a certain paradox that he identifies as characteristic of science-fiction films or novels in which human beings are faced with a threat from a non-human other: ‘[t]he basic model articulated by Descartes – a model which might be called *humanist* […] continues to enjoy the status of “common sense” in contemporary Western culture.’\(^{34}\) From a number of filmic or literary representations of the posthuman condition, it emerges that the belief in a basic human essence (which exists outside ethnicity, religion, class, or sexuality) is still a focal point in terms of how humanity conceives of itself. This clearly creates a gap between philosophers celebrating the crisis of humanism, and popular culture, which seems rather committed to defending the supremacy of the humanist paradigm.\(^{35}\)

*Speaking Parts*, I suggest, inhabits this space of ambivalence and

\(^{32}\) Latham, pp. 171-179 (pp. 172-173).

\(^{33}\) Latham, pp. 171-179 (p. 176).


\(^{35}\) Badmington, pp. 1-10 (p. 8).
contradiction. On the one hand, it appeals to the uniqueness of feelings, tactility, and the human voice in strong opposition to the aesthetic regime of video. Yet on the other, to define Egoyan’s film as the bearer of a ‘humanist consciousness’ would mean to overlook the cutting-edge position that it occupies in terms of cinematographic rendition of a society where flesh and video have completely fused with one another.

The perspective offered by contamination can help us think about these issues more productively. The point I want to make here is that infectiousness as a conceptual framework is particularly suitable to describe how mediating technologies tend to operate in Speaking Parts. Taking issue with Latham’s reading, one might claim that the fact that Egoyan does not indulge in any sort of body-horror is an indication that his attitude towards the body is even more progressive than Cronenberg’s. That is to say: the human/machine relationship has become so pervasive and intimate that the organic body as such has already disappeared from the stage, becoming a ghostly presence for the viewer. To be obsessed with the flesh, or to radicalise its materiality through gory details, may be considered anachronistic. It seems more appropriate to argue that Speaking Parts is similar to Blow-Up for the way in which the abject has been displaced from the fleshy body already. Particular attention will be devoted to these issues in section 2.3, where I shall rely on the concept of decomposition as a way to signify the total boundary collapse and descent into abjection occurring on the grainy surface of the image. Meanwhile, I will emphasise Egoyan’s perceptive understanding of how posthuman technology pervades our everyday lives. The phenomenon of cybersex, for instance, is a very realistic one, and it would become much more extensive in the following years, with the increasing popularity of the Internet. Similarly, according to Egoyan, the film anticipates the actual appearance of video mausoleums in which moving images serve as a repository for memories of the dead.  

Scenarios such as these are indicative of the obsolescence of the biological body in various ways. Whether inadequate or simply improvable, the body can undergo processes of medical replacement of malfunctioning parts, as well as being subjected to displacement and virtualisation in a high-tech reality. One might think of cybersex, and of how it provides scope for sexual gratification whilst removing the desiring subject from the risk of sexually

36 Speaking Parts, DVD commentary by Egoyan.
transmitted diseases. I suggest that this background of physical safety, separation, and disembodied corporeality does not prevent contamination from spreading, albeit in different forms. Throughout this chapter, I will attempt to map them out. I will argue that the notion of image as a viral entity – by definition, an unwanted, invisible presence that cannot be controlled, or easily eradicated – can help us revisit the films Blow-Up and Speaking Parts in a new light. As previously mentioned, we are far from the symbolic penetration and invagination of Max Renn’s body in Videodrome: this insistence on the organic is somewhat obsolete. For Antonioni and Egoyan, our interaction with the new technologies is not epitomised by the intrusion of a foreign body. More like a virus, mediated images propagate indefinitely, transforming the nature of the human they enter into contact with, and unmasking the shifting nature of its conventional boundaries.

In a paper that he presented in March 2013, philosopher and historian of science Andrew Pickering reaffirmed the necessity ‘to think about more intimate couplings of the human and the non-human’, quoting the examples of artificial limbs, prostheses, and psycho-active drugs. These, in transforming our inner states, make us human/non-human hybrids from a performative perspective. ‘All sorts of scientific and technological changes’ – Pickering observes – ‘are making our bodies and minds appear more plastic and amenable to transformation every day.’ If we start to think this way, it becomes clear that ‘we are all cyborgs’, and have always been so (I will deal with the history and the implications of the term ‘cyborg’ later in this subsection). Today the possibilities offered by surgical transformations and genetic manipulations are growing exponentially, meaning that, one day, ‘we will have said goodbye to our evolutionary inheritance and the limitations this imposes on us’.37 In How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics, Katherine Hayles provides a useful and thorough analysis of the posthuman condition, which might be summarised as follows:

First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as

the seat of human identity in the Western tradition long before
Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenon, as
an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when
in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman view
thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to
manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other
prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before
we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other
means, the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be
seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman,
there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between
bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and
biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.\(^{38}\)

This strongly anti-essentialist context exerted an enormous influence upon a
number of feminist scholars dealing with the intersections between gender,
race, visual culture, and the biomedical sphere. In this chapter, I will refer to two
of their works: historian of science Haraway’s subversive conceptualisation of
the ‘cyborg’ metaphor, which began with the publication of her epochal essay ‘A
Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late
Twentieth Century’ in 1985;\(^ {39}\) and Braidotti’s article ‘Cyberfeminism with a
Difference’, especially as regards the theorisation of posthuman embodiment.\(^ {40}\)
The cyber-body is relevant to my study because it speaks to notions of nature,
culture, and gender in relation to the contemporary world, and in a perspective
of positive and fruitful contamination. By using this concept figuratively, I can
navigate through territories of border disruption and renegotiation, gaining a
better understanding of the ways in which the two films undermine our
confidence in the media’s unique ability to capture a transient reality.

Prompted by significant developments in techno-science and artificial
intelligence, a growing fascination with the interactions between the organic and
the technological manifested itself in the late 1980s. In her influential essay,
hailed as the foundational text of cyberfeminism, Haraway uses the metaphor of
the cyborg to describe her transition from a 1970s ‘proper, US socialist-feminist,
white, female, hominid biologist’ to a ‘multiply marked cyborg feminist, who tried
to keep her politics [...] alive in the unpromising times of the last quarter of the

\(^{38}\) Katherine Hayles, How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature,

\(^{39}\) Donna J. Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the
Late Twentieth Century’, in Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (London:

studies/rosi/cyberfem.htm> [accessed 25 May 2012].
twentieth century." Haraway defines the cyborg as ‘a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.’ In her conceptual framework, cybernetic organisms are tools for empowerment that speak to contemporary cultural theories on Western late-capitalist societies via their innate resistance to global systems, binary oppositions, and totalising ideologies, as well as on account of their ‘intimate experience of boundaries, their construction and deconstruction.’

In showing the limits of processes of absolute identification, the cyborg myth dismantles totalising formulations of uncontaminated identity, cohesion, and essential unity. ‘[A] cyborg world’, Haraway writes, ‘might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.’ What the cyborg myth has to offer is a new type of community, or politics – one that is based on ‘affinity’ rather than on ‘identity’. Gender, class consciousness, and race, Haraway argues, are grids which have been forced on us by our tragic encounter with, respectively, patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism. Cyborgs are therefore post-gender, post-Marxist and post-Western; they reject the myth of the garden of Eden, beliefs in pure and original unity, and they embrace a ‘disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self.’

The corollary of Haraway’s cyborg metaphor is the breakdown of the dualisms that have characterised and shaped Western tradition: culture and nature, male and female, as well as mind and body. In these polarities, the author sees the matrices of domination over different groups of people. As an organism of ‘personal and political “technological” pollution’, the cyber-body is endowed with the power to fracture structures of disempowerment and oppression, opening up new and intriguing possibilities. Haraway invokes ‘the power of the margins’, calling for a transformation that entails the task of destroying and reconfiguring boundaries, identities, and categories. The cyborg myth implies seeing ourselves as hybrid creatures. Machines are neither

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something that dominates us, nor something to be uncritically idolised – they are a constituent part of our own embodiment, something that we are responsible for in our everyday life.\(^{47}\) Acknowledging the technological as a component of the human produces a change in how we understand ourselves: the body’s integrity is breached; former boundaries are disrupted, and new ones are created and assimilated \textit{in} the body. Separation is thus not only embraced – it is maintained \textit{within} us. The cyborg myth does not aim at a pre-organic condition of plenitude, nor does it strive to retrieve organic wholeness or unity. It hails the collapse of internal boundaries, because in this continuing renegotiation it sees a potential for political liberation.

The structures of domination at work in the industrial era – in a white, patriarchal, and capitalist context – are, for Haraway, being rendered obsolete by the unfolding new world order. The historical moment we are living in has seen the emergence of new networks of power: the ‘informatics of domination’. Haraway’s analysis of the ‘informatics of domination’ hinges on communication technologies and modern biology, which she identifies as two pivotal sciences in the process of re-shaping of cybernetic bodies.\(^{48}\) Despite being relatively far from Haraway’s enthusiastic tone, the Egoyan of \textit{Speaking Parts}, I suggest, is deeply influenced by this social and technological context. At the same time, he voices his own preoccupations with people’s affective and epistemological over-investments in technologies of mediation. By doing so, he goes back to a long cinematic tradition of suspicion of the media that counts, among its proponents, the Antonioni of \textit{Blow-Up}. It could also be argued that there is a Hitchcockian subtext here, and that this emphasis on the voyeuristic dimension of looking evokes the discourse on spectatorship proposed, for example, by \textit{Rear Window} (1954).

Cyberfeminism denotes a diverse range of theories and debates which examine issues of gender and embodied difference in relation to medical and communication technologies. Among cyberfeminists, some have celebrated the potential of technological development as a catalyst for enacting gender equality, whilst others have suggested that the new living conditions created by digital and reproductive realities reinforce rather than subvert patriarchal power relations. As we have seen, Haraway’s manifesto is very optimistic about the


opportunities that technology offers for radical political transformations. Braidotti, by contrast, takes a different stance: '[a]ll the talk of a brand new telematic world masks the ever-increasing polarisation of resources and means, in which women are the main losers.' As emerged from the previous chapter, in Il deserto rosso, Antonioni positions his muse at the core of a dramatic gap between human emotions and the force of industrialisation. Sensitive to visual and aural signs of toxicity, Giuliana is the symbol of a humanity which struggles to rework its place in a hostile reality, and which is reluctant to engage in the process of adaptation that Antonioni himself advocates. In section 1.1, I referred to Wilson’s scholarship, arguing that Vitti and Khanjian have come to embody similar anxieties about contamination and unfulfilled desires for closeness. Here I suggest that Speaking Parts also situates the woman as an agent of mediation and negotiation. Discourses on cyberfeminism can help us understand the complex ways in which Antonioni and Egoyan posit their actresses and muses both as a response to technology, and as resistant to it.

‘The post-human predicament’, Braidotti reminds us, ‘implies a blurring of gender boundaries.’ The hotel world in Speaking Parts seems to replicate a post-gender society: this is suggested not only by the ambiguity surrounding the gender of the ‘special’ guest in room 106, but also by the androgynous look of the protagonists, with lighting accentuating their physical resemblance. A post-feminist spirit underlies the representation of the Housekeeper, whose motto – ‘Cold heart. Cold mind. Very playful body’ – locates prostitution in a context of individual empowerment. In embodying the Producer’s female double, this character exemplifies how, in a post-industrial milieu, the fight for equality has been achieved, and women have consolidated their power in the workforce. Nevertheless, cyberfeminist theories can provide new insights into some contradictory aspects of the film, namely the fact that Egoyan, somewhat like the Antonioni of Il deserto rosso, does not appear to be completely emancipated from patriarchal models of gender that regard women as being inclined to wholeness and tactility, and therefore more likely to invest in imaging technologies as an affective medium than men. One possible subtext of the disappearance of Clara’s character from her own revised script is that patterns of disempowerment are still underpinned by gender factors.

49 Braidotti, ‘Cyberfeminism with a Difference’.
50 Braidotti, ‘Cyberfeminism with a Difference’.
51 Egoyan, Speaking Parts, p. 89.
Not unlike Latham, Adam Barker maintains that, in Speaking Parts, ‘[v]ideo, and other electronic devices, are used merely as metaphors in a humanistic exploration of alienation which leaves many crucial assumptions unchallenged.’

Accusing the film of ‘surprising conservatism’, he writes that ‘[w]omen […] come off badly as demanding, possessive creatures’, and that ‘Egoyan’s formal and sexual radicalism is, in the end, only skin-deep.’

More recently, Wilson has questioned this perspective: Barker ‘neglects to note the shift in perception where the two women’s mania, their needs, are the subjects of the film, the space in which it exists.’

Several scenarios of missed mediations converge upon Khanjian’s and Rose’s roles, both of which are animated by unfulfilled desires for touch and reciprocity. During the talk show sequence, for instance, Lisa reaches towards the camera that is filming her, as if to overcome the interface as visual and realise its haptic presence. As Marks suggests, ‘haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality.’

Thinking of cinema as haptic is only a step toward considering the ways cinema appeals to the body as a whole.

Another interesting scene is the one in which Egoyan’s female muse crosses the line between consumers and makers of images, with disastrous results. At the wedding party, Lisa separates the newly married couple so as to interview and film the bride alone. In contrast to traditional wedding portraiture, framing here reinforces separation by excluding the groom and decentring the bride:

[L]ove is about… feeling someone else feeling you, right? But sometimes, you can feel someone else, and you can feel them feeling you, but they may no act that way. In your case, it’s the other way around. He says that he loves you, which is great, but I’m not sure if that matters. The question is, ‘Do you feel him feeling you the way you feel yourself’?

Lisa’s question suggests that a degree of separateness is somewhat inherent in any expression of intimacy. Many themes of Speaking Parts converge into this undermining of the pan-cultural myth of marriage oneness. It could be argued that it calls attention to the relationships between body, mind, and external

53 Barker, p. 284.
54 Wilson, Atom Egoyan, pp. 37-38.
55 Marks, p. 163.
56 Egoyan, Speaking Parts, p. 120.
world, or, perhaps, that it hints at a future in which we will have to reconcile our emotions with radical transformations in human subjectivity and sensory perception. A lover’s body cannot be an extension of ourselves: what about our technological enhancements? Will they take the faculties of the human body beyond the realm of possibility?

On the one hand, Khanjian’s character, like Vitti’s, is disempowered and situated at the periphery of the dominant cultural order; but on the other, it is only in Il deserto rosso that the new industrial technologies intensify the existing gender gap. In Speaking Parts, video culture seems to promise a world beyond gender differences whilst, de facto, reiterating inequality and structural power relationships. One could extend this discourse to race: amongst Egoyan’s early features, this is the only one in which Khanjian’s Armenian ethnicity is not explicitly recognised, but only implied by her accent (the Producer and the Housekeeper, however, are blond and Anglo-Saxon). In this respect, it is important to emphasise that the posthuman condition emerging from Speaking Parts is pervaded by new patterns of inequality and exclusion: the modern hierarchies of power, created and maintained by means of surveillance and control, lie within the dominant system of representation.

Braidotti situates the notion of cyber-body at the heart of postmodernity, a designation that she adopts to indicate ‘the specific historical situation of post-industrial societies after the decline of modernist hopes and tropes’. A key feature of her conceptualisation of the postmodern age is the hegemony of a transnational economy whose interests increasingly bypass those of the single nation state. Braidotti thus identifies ‘a new and perversely fruitful alliance between technology and culture’: the postmodern paradigm makes it imperative for us to consider the technological factor not as ‘antithetical to the human organism and set of values’, but as ‘co-extensive with and inter-mingled with the human.’ In the art world, this reciprocal contamination manifests itself in terms of a ‘move away from technophobia, towards a more technophilic approach.’

We are reminded here of Antonioni’s comment, quoted at the beginning of this subsection, about the aesthetic appeal of heavy industry in Il deserto rosso. The Italian filmmaker, regarded as one of cinema’s greatest modernist auteurs, reveals a sensibility that, to a certain extent, can also be considered as

57 Wilson, Atom Egoyan, p. 34.
58 Braidotti, ‘Cyberfeminism with a Difference’.
59 Braidotti, ‘Cyberfeminism with a Difference’.
postmodern – or better still, as I will contend in the rest of this chapter, presciently posthuman.

Scholarly literature extensively explored *Blow-Up* and *Speaking Parts* in terms of ontology of the image, regarding them as epistemological allegories, or disenchanted meditations on cinema and the industry of spectacle (see also section 2.3). It is also possible to view, in these films, a profound attention to the details of a social reality undergoing a phase of evolution in a rapidly globalising milieu. I suggest that the Producer’s remark about the hotel in *Speaking Parts* – ‘It’s very special. So... intimate’ – is indicative of how contemporary representational praxes do not respect but breach the traditional boundaries of the individual.\(^60\) As has been observed, the hotel location functions as a metaphor for the entertainment system and its role in creating illusions.\(^61\) The screens saturating the hotel spaces have become disturbingly *intimate* objects, or, as Wilson puts it, ‘prosthetic aids’ in the characters’ quest for love and reciprocity.\(^62\) Technologies of vision are inextricably entwined with posthuman aesthetics. Amanda du Preez has remarked that if posthumanism is preparing humanity for a post-biological future through technological intervention on the body, then ‘[t]he role of the visual and imaging technologies in the construction and realisation of posthuman aesthetics cannot be overstated or over-emphasised.’\(^63\) The gallery of pictures and flickering screens that Antonioni and Egoyan present us with has become the privileged site for renegotiating bodily boundaries and transcending binary thinking. How can we know where our bodies begin and end? What determines proximity, especially in the light of the emerging communication technologies? Let us consider, for instance, the last teleconference call between Clara and Lance: the shot/reverse-shot cutting makes viewers believe that the two characters are sitting across from each other at a table. Only by the end of that sequence do we realise that they are actually thousands of miles apart.\(^64\)

As outlined at the beginning of this section, the radical transformation in

\(^60\) Egoyan, *Speaking Parts*, p. 73.

\(^61\) Egoyan, *Speaking Parts*, p. 172. See also Wilson, *Atom Egoyan*, p. 36; and Romney, pp. 61-62.

\(^62\) Wilson, *Atom Egoyan*, p. 34.


\(^64\) *Speaking Parts*, DVD commentary by Egoyan.
the human form that Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s artistic discourses envisage is primarily articulated at the level of imaging technologies, but not exclusively. It is also reflected, I suggest, in other subsidiary practices of mediation: the transcendence of the notion of an innate, natural body encompasses multiple manifestations of technological development. In his pioneering inquiry into the media as extensions of the human being, McLuhan devotes a section to what he calls a ‘direct extension of the outer surface of the body’ – clothing. This medium, McLuhan reminds us, ‘can be seen both as a heat-control mechanism and as a means of defining the self socially.’ Additionally, clothing also functions as a protective layer against contact with unwanted substances. A filmic analysis that draws attention to how garments serve as a surrogate for the wearer’s skin will be particularly productive for Blow-Up, and is justified by the complex use that Antonioni makes of fashioning practices. Clothes, as the next subsections will contend, speak of all but the ‘natural’ body they cover, and thereby lend themselves to be read in terms of later debates on the decline of the humanist view.

The posthuman paradigm constitutes the rationale for conducting my research on two increasingly intermingling levels – body and image – and for studying the dynamics of mediation and contamination associated to them both. These arguably bring about a reconfiguration of the human organism as a technological artefact and a cultural product, thus endorsing an anti-essentialist critique of categories based on nature. The abundance of virtual bodies in Blow-Up and Speaking Parts displace corporeality and articulate it at a new cultural level. Similarly, the theme of organ transplantation signifies the obsolescence of the biological body as well as the emergence of a posthuman one. Braidotti’s article explores these issues in relation to cosmetic surgery: the new body in question heralds the transition to a different era, marked by the ‘decline of the naturalistic paradigm.’ In a posthuman world, Braidotti argues, ‘deliberate attempts to pursue perfection are seen as a complement to evolution, bringing the embodied self to a higher stage of accomplishment.’ The attention that several cyberfeminists have paid to cosmetic surgery as a technology of the gendered body is motivated by the need to demonstrate how standards of

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65 McLuhan, p. 119.
66 Braidotti, ‘Cyberfeminism with a Difference’.
beauty are not only culturally determined, but also dependent on the normative gaze embodied by visual technologies.

A logical point to make here is that transplantation surgery is performed for functional rather than cosmetic reasons. However, it could also be argued that today these practices of correction can vary significantly in nature, and that the motives behind them can easily combine medical, social, and cultural needs. More importantly, cosmetic and transplantation surgery equally bring to the fore the loss of structural integrity that accompanies the disappearance of the body as a biological entity. Transplantation, as we will see, has opened the way to the redefinition of our distinct parts as flaw or pathological: internal organs have become – somewhat like clothing – totally disposable, and interchangeable.

2.2.2 Clothing As a Second Skin

It is no coincidence that there are so many overlaps between clothing and cinematic terminologies – etymologically, a film is a pellicule, a membrane, or a thin layer of skin. Before embarking on a discussion of Blow-up and Speaking Parts in relation to discourses on fashion, clothing, and cinema, it is important to clarify what the phrase ‘fashioned body’ means. This involves acknowledging a profound indebtedness to Entwistle’s theories, but also the need to adapt her conceptual framework to a filmic analysis that, in turn, can broaden our understanding of cinematic responses to technology and mediation in the post-industrial age.

Entwistle starts from the premise that, as anthropological accounts on dress indicate, no culture leaves the body completely unadorned. The human body is always dressed, painted, tattooed, embellished or decorated in some way.\textsuperscript{67} It is well known that what constitutes dress depends on cultural specificities, and that what is considered appropriate dress changes from one situation to another: the social world requires that we appear dressed.\textsuperscript{68} In light of this, Entwistle’s scholarship is aimed at filling the existing gap between theories of the body, which, in her view, tend to ignore dress, and fashion

\textsuperscript{67} Entwistle, \textit{The Fashioned Body}, pp. 42-43.
\textsuperscript{68} Entwistle, \textit{The Fashioned Body}, pp. 6-7.
theories, which frequently pay too little attention to the significance of the body in terms of understanding dress. Taking issue with this literature, she proposes an investigation of dress as a ‘situated bodily practice’ as a theoretical and methodological framework to disentangle the complex interrelations between dress, body and culture.69

In an essay co-written with Elizabeth Wilson,70 Entwistle suggests that we habitually experience dress, the body and the self as a totality.71 Dress is normally perceived as alive and ‘fleshy’, because it operates dialectically with the body: ‘dress works on the body, imbuing it with social meaning, while the body is a dynamic field that gives life and fullness to dress.’72 In this light, the ‘fashioned’ or ‘dressed’ body is ‘a fleshy, phenomenological entity that is so much a part of our experience of the social world, so thoroughly embedded within the micro-dynamics of social order, as to be entirely taken for granted.’73 Entwistle acknowledges the significance of Michel Foucault’s studies for understanding the ways in which dynamics of power govern dress, but identifies the lack of any account of individual agency as one of the drawbacks of structuralist and poststructuralist approaches.74 Phenomenological philosophy, by contrast, brings the paradigm of embodiment to the fore, and offers the potential to grasp dress as ‘embodied practice’. Specifically, Entwistle credits Maurice Merleau-Ponty with counteracting Foucault’s tendency to consider the body as a ‘passive’ object: Merleau-Ponty looks at the self as being positioned in a body, and the living body, in turn, combines with and belongs to time and space.75 By drawing on the different and complementary insights into the body that structuralism and phenomenology offer, Entwistle aims to capture the ‘socially structured and embodied and practical’ aspects of the dressed body.76 Always located within a particular physical and historical context, dress is a means by which the body acquires meaning within a given social order, and

70 Unless otherwise specified, all references to Wilson shall be interpreted as references to the scholar Emma Wilson. For the sake of clarity, the name of the scholar Elizabeth Wilson will be always given in full.
simultaneously, the result of individual, mundane actions like selective choices about what to wear.\textsuperscript{77}

Dress, Entwistle writes, ‘involves practical actions directed by the body upon the body, which result in ways of being and ways of dressing.’\textsuperscript{78} As an extension of the body yet not completely part of it, dress can affect our ability to move, to breathe, and our awareness of skin boundaries, its mediating function being not solely directed to the social realm, but also to the very experience of the body/self.\textsuperscript{79} The core of Entwistle’s theoretical study is thus on the dressed body as a lived and everyday experience: it is evident that such a paradigm may be problematic in terms of filmic analysis, unless, as Sarah Street has noted, we are interested in how audiences emulate screen fashions in their everyday wear.\textsuperscript{80} Yet while the notion of dress as a day-to-day embodied practice does not easily lend itself to a textual analysis of the chosen films, there are still significant aspects of Entwistle’s work that speak directly to Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s awareness of the fashioned nature of the body. This recognition, as I aim to demonstrate, echoes and reinforces the films’ primary concerns with technologies of vision, and is closely related to the main thrust of the narratives.

Above all, what makes Entwistle’s conceptual frame suitable for my discussion and interesting from a posthuman point of view is the importance it grants to encounters of body and dress. Both she and Elizabeth Wilson have repeatedly foregrounded the impossibility of pulling dress and body apart: costume museums, in providing an opportunity to observe the artistic beauty of garments alone, can be an uncanny and ‘strangely alienating’ experience. Dress is lifeless and deficient when withdrawn from the body it covered, because its nature is twofold: on the one hand, it is a craft object in its own right, on the other – a crucial component of the everyday ‘dress/body performance that constitutes identity’.\textsuperscript{81} What I want to highlight is that the notion of fashioned body enables us to conceive of the human not as an uncontaminated Edenic entity, but as a cultural and artificially reconstructed organism, which has

\textsuperscript{77} Entwistle, ‘Fashion and the Fleshy Body’, p. 344.
\textsuperscript{78} Entwistle, ‘Fashion and the Fleshy Body’, p. 344.
\textsuperscript{79} Entwistle, ‘Fashion and the Fleshy Body’, p. 334.
ceased to be a marker of purity and truth. The aim of the next subsection, therefore, will be to elucidate how the two films, via their diverse interests in fashioning practices, reconfigure the impossibility of an un-fashioned, natural body, and how this contributes to undermining our faith in forms of mediation and representation.

The theoretical framework offered by Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson is relevant to the present study also because of the attention it pays to dress codes, gender, and the ways in which dress operates at a micro-social level. In the next phase of my discussion, I will concentrate on the mediating function played by dressing and undressing acts in Antonioni’s film. My analysis will make some intertextual references to Wenders’s documentary about Japanese fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto, *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*, as well as to Anne Hollander’s in-depth investigation into the unclothed body in Western art, which Entwistle discusses with regard to social presentations of nakedness. By interrelating posthuman theories with discourses on clothing, I will be able to enter into critical dialogue with some scholarly work on the Italian filmmaker. More importantly, I will demonstrate how the incorporation of strategies of dress in *Blow-Up* works to emphasise the power of media technologies to promise, disguise, and ultimately deny a hidden truth. Another aspect to be considered here concerns the relationship that fashion and dress have to identity. Although this constitutes a pertinent approach to *Blow-Up* and *Speaking Parts*, it is my intention to leave questions of identity for Chapter Three, since *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin* posit the tension between appearance and subjectivity in a far more radical manner.

All these theoretical resources suggest new ways of dealing with the themes that *Blow-Up* and *Speaking Parts* raise, as long as we partially reconsider what we mean by fashioning practices of the body. Entwistle establishes a clear distinction between the concepts of ‘fashion’ and ‘dress’. With the former, she refers to a historically and geographically specific system for the manufacturing, marketing and provision of clothing, which is dominated by an internal logic of rapid and regular change. The term ‘dress’, by contrast, emphasises the very act of covering the body with clothes, but does not exclude

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the possibility of other aesthetic processes of adornment. As Entwistle and other theorists observe, fashion is also associated with the creation of cultural and aesthetic discourses that, along with gender and social factors, influence the clothing choices of individuals on a daily basis. This leads her to the conclusion that, despite their differences, both fashion and dress are ultimately to be regarded as phenomena of the body. Given the aims of this filmic analysis, however, it is important to demonstrate that the connotations of the term ‘fashion’ can extend beyond this. Fashion, I suggest, includes ways of forging, moulding, reshaping – putting something into a particular form. This rethinking is necessary for linking dress and transplantation surgery as fashioning practices of mediation that, in these films, bear witness to the artificial reconstruction of the body, and to the reciprocal contamination of biological and technological factors.

It goes without saying that we do not dress simply for the eye, and that dress as a wearable technology of the body is, in reality, much broader in scope. As our second, extended skin, clothing can express a variety of different and often contradictory functions: exhibition and modesty; a desire to conform or to individualise oneself; and protection against physical or psychological dangers. The multifaceted nature of adornment strengthens the case for a rethinking of the fashioned body that encompasses not only what the body wears, but also what modifies it through surgical procedures. If, on the one hand, dress alters the shape of our bodies, policing and regulating presentations of the self in society, transplantation, on the other, sets us free from our biological limitations, making the body-machine as resistant and efficient as possible. What such practices share is a subtle transgression or reconfiguration of bodily boundaries. In light of this, subsection 2.2.3 attempts to draw a parallel between un-fashioning and re-fashioning acts in Blow-Up and Speaking Parts. By doing so, it aims to show how organ transplantation fails to match up to over-expectations of mediation, becoming a metaphor for missed or impossible corporeal connection. Whether used to negotiate sexual intimacy as in Blow-Up, or to manifest power relationships as in Speaking Parts, dress bears the mark of surface, in that it intervenes between the individual and the external world by acting on skin edges: the distinction between exterior and

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84 Entwistle, The Fashioned Body, pp. 48-49.
85 Entwistle, The Fashioned Body, p. 56.
interior spaces is blurred, and the sense of a separate, contained self is subtly troubled. The surgically re-fashioned body in *Speaking Parts*, by contrast, has taken bodily boundaries beyond the very possibility of intimacy, discovering that extreme proximity – to a person, but also to an image – can be lethal. Decades after the release of Antonioni’s film, with the advanced technological potential now available to us, what we witness is a desperate effort to reach out to the other – by carving into human flesh.

The imagery of cyborgs and posthuman bodies as hybrid, artificial beings without a natural origin will continue to guide my analysis, in that they represent a crucial point of convergence between acts of technological mediation and phenomena of contamination. As we have seen, this constitutes an interesting conceptual framework from which to examine the use of clothing in *Blow-Up*. Additionally, it can help to explain how, in many respects, the defeat of surgical intervention in *Speaking Parts* is that of other types of technological mediation in microcosm. The transplantation eventually saves Clara’s life, but at a high price, since Clarence dies from a viral infection.\(^{86}\) A medical act of mediation causes, in a literal sense, contamination to spread, and destroys the life that it aimed to preserve. As I aim to show, there is a strong parallel here with another question posed by the film, and namely to what extent media technologies can effectively convey emotions. *Speaking Parts* abounds with close-ups and medium close-ups, with several characters looking straight into the eye of the camera, but the mediated appearance of the body is no guarantee of any authenticity whatsoever (see also section 2.3). This is further suggested by the fact that all the characters seem doubles of each other, and are virtually interchangeable: the tearful father of the bride, for example, reappears during the talk show sequence, in the guise of Ronnie’s fictional parent. Viewers learn to be suspicious even of the mediation provided by bodily fluids: tears, as Marks reminds us, are ‘a material expression of an internal state’ that quickly disappears back into the body.\(^{87}\) Talking about his films of the 1980s, Egoyan has highlighted how they are intended to resist traditional forms of character identification.\(^{88}\) The actors’ bleak performance, I would argue, adds to the construction of a world in which attempts to reach out to others end up intensifying the sense of separation. With their opaque, deliberately impersonal

\(^{86}\) *Speaking Parts*, DVD commentary by Egoyan.
\(^{87}\) Marks, p. 122.
\(^{88}\) *Speaking Parts*, DVD commentary by Egoyan.
acting style, the characters of Speaking Parts are themselves failing mediators, a hindrance to processes of mediation and identification between spectator and human figure on screen.

The emphasis, therefore, is not so much on the power of technology to mediate, but on its capability to dissimulate – to unmediate – human emotions. Scholarship on Speaking Parts tends to overlook how this aspect of the film is reflected and reinforced by the motif of transplantation surgery. Subsection 2.2.3 discusses the re-fashioned body also in the light of sociological literature on organ transplantation, and models derived from cultural studies’ accounts of transplantation narratives in film.

2.2.3 Un-fashioning/Re-fashioning the Body

My analysis of Blow-Up is only marginally concerned with fashion as an industry or a specific system of dress, as it is with fashion photography in a specific way. Dress, from my perspective, encompasses fashion, in that fashionable clothing is a particular form of dress. The aspects of garments I am most interested in lie in their status as wearable technologies that we perceive as a second skin. As explained in the previous subsection, they have the potential for becoming an integral part of our posthuman bodies, and for operating as a medium and a carrier of meaning. In general terms, my study is based on the idea that body, clothing, and image are closely tied together, and that the auteurs’ awareness about practices of fashion echoes their self-consciousness about the impact that the new imaging technologies have had on society.

It is essential to begin by considering how I will position my argument with regard to contemporary literature on Blow-Up. In order to think productively about the fashioned body in this film, one should move beyond the emphasis that critics have frequently placed on the symbolism of its objects, dress included. At the same time, the film’s fashionable items of clothing, so evocative of the Swinging Sixties, cannot be reduced to mere historicising features. In her recent analysis of ‘objectuality’ in Antonioni’s films, Rascaroli demonstrates the importance of expanding on conceptual frameworks of symbolism and historicisation, which cannot exhaust the complexity of the director’s discourse.
on the inanimate world.\textsuperscript{89} Interested in the object on account of its aesthetic and commercial value, Rascaroli points out that Antonioni’s things – accessories, clothes, artefacts, and buildings – represent the opposite poles of ‘universality and historicity, thingness and no-thingness.’\textsuperscript{90} On the one hand, objects are inscribed with modernity, because of ‘their ability to enter into signifying relationships with contemporary extra-textual discourses on art, culture, identity, class, industry, fashion, power, nation’ (see also section 1.2). On the other, they transcend historicisation, ‘not so much because they seem to function symbolically’, but ‘because they are irreducible material presences – because they are other-than-subject.’\textsuperscript{91} The scholar regards \textit{Blow-Up} as a crucial step that Antonioni takes towards newer filmic forms that she describes as ‘proto-postmodern’: the film, indeed, detaches itself from modernism, while still lacking those traits of irony and parody that are commonly associated with artistic expressions of the postmodern.\textsuperscript{92} The object, and more specifically the found object, is recognised as playing a pivotal role in such a transition.\textsuperscript{93}

This postulation of the need to move beyond symbolic and historicised readings of objectuality in \textit{Blow-Up} can be an incentive to turn to investigate, rather than the object as ‘other-than-subject’, dress as an \textit{incorporated} part of the subject, that is, as a technological extension of the body which determines its presentation to the social world. How does this methodological approach relate to wider discourses on epistemological uncertainty and dissolution of the real into the image? Rohdie has observed that Antonioni’s films are dense with instances of fashion, dressing, undressing, transfer of clothes from one person to another, as well as shots of abandoned clothes. Examples are multiple and varied: Rohdie cites scenes from \textit{Cronaca di un amore} (1950); \textit{Tentato suicidio} (one episode of the film \textit{L’amore in città}, 1953); \textit{La notte} (1961); \textit{Blow-Up}; \textit{The Passenger}; and \textit{Zabriskie Point}. Focusing on the dress worn by Lidia (Jeanne Moreau) and Valentina (Vitti) in \textit{La notte}, he writes that: ‘[a]s dress comes away from person, so the attachment of person to body becomes less: dress takes on a life of its own as texture, fold, colour, shine, pattern, surface, geometry, tone, and it does so in relation to a body.’ Rohdie then establishes an interesting link

\textsuperscript{89} See also Nowell-Smith, ‘Shape and a Black Point’, pp. 354-363 (p. 360).
\textsuperscript{90} Rascaroli, pp. 64-81 (p. 65).
\textsuperscript{91} Rascaroli, pp. 64-81 (p. 64).
\textsuperscript{92} Rascaroli, pp. 64-81 (p. 68).
\textsuperscript{93} Rascaroli, pp. 64-81 (pp. 73-74).
between the director’s tendency towards abstraction and the fact that ‘dress often figures prominently as artifice, materials and design which form images and illusions of bodies [...], and as pure visual play.’ It is nevertheless a play that always questions ‘that line between patterns and substance, design and meaning, landscape (ground) and story.’ Reflecting on these queries can help shed light on how Antonioni pushes us towards a forward-looking perception of the posthuman condition. The attention that Blow-Up gives to dynamics of dress and micro-social practices is a good starting point for my discussion, and an original way to address the film’s semiotic theme (which will be dealt with in more detail in section 2.3). In the final part of this subsection, I shall concentrate more specifically on Speaking Parts in terms of fashioned body in its broadest sense; it is my intention, however, to keep the two auteurs in constant dialogue with one another, in light of the self-conscious anxiety about the appearance of the body that they share.

Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s cinemas have one common denominator: the propensity to undermine our confidence in dress as a vehicle for situating the self socially. The first time we view Bubba in The Adjuster, his shabby look leads us to believe that he is a tramp; only later do we realise that he is a rich man pretending to be somebody else. The same thing happens for the protagonist of Blow-Up. We first see him among the doss-house dwellers, and suppose that he is one of them. But as he leaps into his Rolls Royce, we realise that his look has misled us. The emphasis here is on the liminal nature of clothes, which, by reinforcing the gap between public appearance and private self, opens up infinite possibilities of camouflage and ambivalence. Antonioni’s camera then juxtaposes two nuns, a guard in uniform, and the mime artists, in what Robin Wood defined ‘an image of naturalistically feasible unreality’. As Brunette observes, critics have often taken this juxtaposition symbolically, highlighting the binary opposition between dress codes as a sign of rigidity and repression, and the mimes as a symbol of the Mod culture of the 1960s, with its anarchist spirit of playfulness and freedom. However, if we combine these two aspects together, we notice that they can also signify the inherent meaninglessness of dress codes as a quest for order and unproblematic significance. In his reading of the film, semiotician Jurij Lotman suggests that

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94 Rohdie, pp. 121-122.
‘from the very start the theme “seeker of documentary information” and “disguised” are merged.’ The extreme version of fashioned body represented by the mimes will be discussed in more detail at the end of this chapter, in relation to the films’ denouements (see subsection 2.3.2).

In Blow-Up, there are other examples of extras wearing clothes that imply allegiance to a group (the custodian of the park, for instance, or some men walking the street in African traditional costumes). This relates to the existence of an inter-subjective cultural space in which dress practices mediate the relationships between people. Egoyan’s use of uniforms in Speaking Parts has slightly different overtones, in that it is primarily attributable to the re-articulation of power structures and hierarchies. The ‘strong polarities of power’ characterising the enclosed world of the hotel have been highlighted by Beard, who notes that the sense of alienation permeating this ‘dystopic’ social milieu is reflected in the film’s detached mise-en-scène and ‘fastidious formal elegance’. In Egoyan’s film, dress codes serve as a form of representation and signification that disciplines the body; at the same time, they signify the dynamics of surveillance and control imposed by the industry of spectacle upon a multitude of disempowered viewers. One might argue that, in this respect, also the film’s colour scheme is revealing, with the housekeepers’ dark uniform contrasting the flesh pink of inanimate objects – balloons, sheets, and towels.

If uniforms denote lack of individual agency, then the cultivation of one’s physical appearance is perceived as being an instrument to reverse this system of disempowerment. Before taking part in the talk show, Lance models his screen presence by having his hair cut. The sequence in which he stares at a pair of shoes in a clothes shop is emblazoningly intercut with images of Lisa ‘shopping’ for videotapes in which he appears as an extra. Latham argues that this association exhibits the commodification of desire that characterises late-capitalist societies, and how its exploitation is carried out through the seductive power of the screened image: ‘the hegemony of the image imposes a screen between people, insinuating its cool, vacuous surface into the growing rift separating human bodies.’ I would add that, in a consumerist culture that sells

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images as a leisure activity, fashioning practices are offered as a strategy for putting one’s body into form, and, ultimately, for promoting it as an object of consumption.

As these examples illustrate, an emphasis on the replication of social structures through practices of dress paradoxically coexists with the exhibition of the arbitrariness of those very practices. Antonioni and Egoyan clearly indicate that social presentations of the body cannot be trusted as a textual site for the construction of the self. This has two main consequences: first, it adds to the creation of a world in which any effort to fashion a body is a fruitless attempt to reach out to its essence. The possibilities of framing the self that fashion and dress offer are, by definition, always fleeting and transitory. Second, by complicating the meaning of dress as a form of signification, the directors frustrate the yearning to un-fashion a body – that is, to access its allegedly essential truth, regardless of the apparatuses of aesthetic technologies attached to it. To put it in another way, we cannot see beyond some forms of artifice and mediation, nor are we able to determine the boundaries of the human in absolute terms. As previously explained, this concept conforms with the posthuman paradigm, according to which any attempt to separate the human organism from its technologically extended parts is doomed to failure, as is any understanding of the body which grounds itself on organic wholes, or Edenic categories.

An original perspective on the themes outlined above is offered by a documentary about the fashion designer Yamamoto that Wenders made in 1989, Notebook on Cities and Clothes. I wish to use some extracts from this film to show how dynamics of fashion can be productively related to processes of creation and consumption of images. To paraphrase Wenders, clothes should enable people to look at their reflection in such a way that they can more readily recognise and accept their own body, appearance, and history – in short, themselves. The German filmmaker identifies fashioning strategies with the conceptualisation of an image of oneself, and the attempt to resemble that image. Hollander holds a similar view when she writes that ‘[c]lothes make, not the man but the image of man.’ Fashion designing and cinema, Wenders suggests, are about craftsmanship, and, as such, they have much in common: ‘to build the true chair, to design the true shirt – in short, to find the essence of a

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100 Hollander, p. xv.
thing in the process of fabricating it.' This leads us back to the idea of fashioning a body as a way of pursuing its truth, fugitive and elusive as it may be – for images and clothes change more and more quickly, and the sense of what is fashionable relates only to the here and now.

In *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*, Wenders also alludes to the advent of digital technology, and how it has carried the distance between copy and original to extremes. Ever since electronic images replaced celluloid ones, he comments, everything has become a copy, to such an extent that the very concept of the original is obsolete: ‘all distinctions have become arbitrary. No wonder the idea of identity finds itself in such a feeble state. Identity is out, out of fashion.’ The connection that Wenders makes between fashion, the fluid nature of the self, and the disappearance of a physical referent invites us to see how phenomena of dress can be fruitfully employed to signify structures of mediation and signification that revolve around the ontology of the image. These issues are all the more important when one considers the transition from celluloid to analogue and digital video, and how this has transformed all aspects of visual culture: the lack of indexicality that pertains to the digital media is the loss of a physical relationship of the image to the pro-filmic object. I will return to the indexical function of photography in section 2.3.

One way to look at fashioning strategies is as day-to-day ephemeral encounters with a conceptualised idea of body. Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson highlight the significance of getting dressed as a routine technique of negotiation between body and world, which encompasses the fashion industry, individual agency, and social factors of everyday life:

> It is simultaneously an intimate experience of the body and a public presentation of it. Operating on the boundaries between self and others, it is the interface between the individual and the social world, the meeting-place of the private and the public. It is a suit of armour or a shell, for, like the crab, the ‘raw’ human body is distinguished by its characteristic of being somehow unfinished, unpeeled, vulnerable and incomplete.

Un-fashioning practices, on the other hand, may be thought of as a way of gaining, or offering, a supposedly unfiltered bodily intimacy. In *Blow-Up*,

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101 Passage transcribed from film.
102 Passage transcribed from film.
Antonioni accentuates dressing and undressing acts as micro-social forms of mediation between characters. As happens in Speaking Parts, the integrity of the body is dismantled simultaneously with the integrity of the image. I would suggest that, with regard to the blowing-up process which leads Thomas to believe that he can reconstruct the murder in the park, the removal of clothing creates a parallel illusion: that the underlying reality of the body will lead to a revelation of truth. Redgrave’s character takes off her clothes from the waist up when she realises that there is no other way to get the roll of film she desperately wants. Rohdie, who emphasises the unnatural displacement of figures in the studio space, observes that it is not only Thomas who tries to remould Jane’s body: Antonioni’s camera is fully engaged in this process of ‘framing bodies, placing them in one position and then in another, trying them out from different angles, against different backgrounds’, to the extent that the film’s narrative ‘literally loses its way in the pursuit of an image’.\footnote{Rohdie, p. 68.}

As the photographer takes the woman to his bedroom, the camera lingers on the roll of film that he throws on her empty blouse, inviting us, perhaps, to posit a link between the two as forms of technological mediation (figure 2.a). In this regard, it is important to mention that also Egoyan makes use of the imagery of dress divorced from the body to subvert the potential of signification of clothing. Note, for instance, how the painting of an empty sweater in Azah’s room in Next of Kin serves as a stark reminder that the body’s appearance constitutes a medium in itself, and that, as such, it can be more meaningful than its fleshy content (figure 3.a).

Returning to Blow-Up, also the undressing of the teenage girls contains an implicit offer of sex – as Brunette puts it, it is ‘part of an economic exchange’, aimed at getting something non-sexual from the protagonist in return.\footnote{Brunette, p. 114.} When the girls find some fashionable items of clothing hung on a clothes rail, they try them on. One girl is left partially naked from the waist up; as Thomas enters the scene, he strips off her blouse completely. The ensuing orgy sequence takes on more playful overtones only when the naked girls manage to re-establish a sort of balance by pulling off Thomas’s shirt. Following an abrupt cut, we view the protagonist being dressed by the teenage girls while his attention returns to the photographs taken in the park – a detail that, for Wood, ‘clearly implies that he
has established himself as their lord and master'.\(^{106}\) It is significant that all the sequences in which female characters get undressed for Thomas's eyes deliberately elide any representation of sexual intercourse, and that the only scene of sex that we see is with the photographer as a voyeur, at his neighbours' house. This is very reminiscent of Speaking Parts, where sex can only be seen if it is mediated by electronic processes. For Thomas, the naked body is as elusive as the corpse in the park, and his failure to get to the essence of the unclothed body echoes his failure to grasp objective reality via technologies of vision.

Nakedness is not a marker of truth in Blow-Up, but rather another layer by which the appearance of the body is brought into being. Entwistle pays particular attention to how the situated nature of the dressed body infuses it with gendered meanings, observing that particular spaces or situations 'impose their own structures on the individual and her sense of her body, and she may in turn employ strategies of dress aimed at managing her body in these spaces.'\(^{107}\)

The bare human figure, Entwistle comments, can be so disruptive of the micro-social order, that our ways of seeing the naked body in the social world, besides being restricted by ethical codes, are always dominated by conventions of dress.\(^{108}\) The undressing bodies of Redgrave and the teenage girls are meaningful because strongly gendered, and hence 'clothed' by societal norms and expectations: from a feminist perspective, they constitute more a social construction, than a product of nature. The exposure of naked flesh in Blow-Up is a signifier of sexual intimacy, carefully handled to bear a precise cultural message – the commodification of the female body. Consequently, rather than being reconfigured as a neutrally coded or un-cultural fact, nudity enacts the conformity to traditional gender roles and conventions. In this light, I would conceive of the film's stress on acts of dressing and undressing as a way of reaffirming the protagonist's powerlessness to get to the core of mediation processes, that is, to reach a supposedly pure space that has been purged of any reference to itself as a medium.

In Seeing Through Clothes, Hollander argues for an understanding of the unadorned self as a social construction that is subject to the current parameters of fashion, to such an extent that 'an image of the nude body that is absolutely

\(^{106}\) Cameron and Wood, p. 137.


free of any counterimage of clothing is virtually impossible’. By demonstrating that ways of rendering the nude in Western art originate from the dominant forms by which adornment is conceived at that time in history, she provides evidence that our perception of nudity closely depends upon a sense of clothing:

It is tempting to believe that people always feel physically the same and that they look different only because the cut of their garments changes – to subscribe to the notion of a universal, unadorned mankind that is universally naturally behaved when naked. But art proves that nakedness is not universally experienced and perceived any more than clothes are. At any time, the unadorned self has more kinship with its own usual dressed aspect than it has with any undressed human selves in other times and places, who have learned a different visual sense of the clothed body.

Christian thought, Hollander notes, sees clothing as ‘unnatural or profane in its very essence, the result of man’s fall, undoubtedly grew out of the direct experience of the erotic pull of dress – even modest dress.’ She thus identifies two forms in which the state of nakedness has been idealised: the first ‘respects the body as essentially innocent when unadorned, like an animal’s, and thus beautiful in its purity.’ The second exalts the virtues of the bare human figure by regarding it as ‘a kind of divine artistic achievement’:

Clothing – so distracting, so different from flesh but so necessary to it – came to be conceived of either as an inessential trapping, a gaudy show that was always less beautiful than the sacred living body it conceals, or as a protective and deceptively beautiful cloak, required to hide man’s wretched original state, which had been perfect but became shameful after his fall.

There are components of the dressed body that cannot be escaped. If we accept that Blow-Up’s recurrent negotiations of bodily boundaries through phenomena of dress are indicative of Antonioni’s acknowledgement of the inherently fashioned nature of the body, then it seems logical to posit that his view of technology predates important aspects of the posthuman paradigm. Entangled in structures of perpetual mediation, Blow-Up’s fashioned bodies may be seen as forerunners of cyborgs living in a post-Edenic world. Hayles

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109 Hollander, pp. 85-86.
110 Hollander, pp. xii-xiii.
111 Hollander, p. 85.
112 Hollander, p. 85.
writes: ‘my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being.’\textsuperscript{113} It can be relevant to refer back to Haraway’s manifesto here, according to which ‘[t]he cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust.’\textsuperscript{114} The cyborg metaphor is one of tangible contamination, for the reason that it takes the experience of boundaries \textit{within} the body. To use Haraway’s words, it implies that ‘the certainty of what counts as nature – a source of insight and promise of innocence – is undermined, probably fatally.’\textsuperscript{115}

The last sequence of \textit{Blow-Up} I want to examine here is the photo shoot of the models. I shall start from a comment by Brunette, who emphasises the extreme objectification of their bodies, and regards this scene as emblematic of conventional power dynamics of the male gaze. According to Brunette, the models are:

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\text{[…]} \text{ grotesquely anorexic beings, horribly made up, who have been turned into near-monsters. The screaming artificiality of their clothes, hairdos, and poses […] strip them of any residual humanity.}\textsuperscript{116}
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Fashion clothing openly defies the human form in this scene, reshaping its look according to abstract design. It functions as an extension and an amputation of body parts: limbs, curves, and faces are either altered or completely erased. The notion of ‘residual humanity’, however, is a problematic one. I would recognise a distance from Brunette’s humanist approach here, since it reveals his indebtedness to conceptual frameworks of symbolism, whose insufficiency, as I mentioned above, has already been demonstrated by Rascaroli. From my perspective, Antonioni’s discourse is much more radical than this: it envisages an ideal of fashioned body which lines up with the image to suggest that our traditional views of what counts as human and real are undergoing a deep transformation. Let us note, for instance, that the photo shoot scene suggests a stylization, or even an abstraction, of the models’ bodies, which is indicative of the photographer’s distorted perception of the world as an image. ‘Stripes, let the dress just fall down!’ – he shouts to one of the girls, equating her with the

\textsuperscript{113} Hayles, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{114} Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’, pp. 149-181 (p. 151).
\textsuperscript{115} Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’, pp. 149-181 (pp. 152-153).
\textsuperscript{116} Brunette, p. 113.
pattern on her dress. McLuhan’s famous equation ‘the medium is the message’ offers an insight into how I would look at fashion clothing in this scene. For McLuhan, the medium is the message because it is the medium that alters and restructures human relations, ‘that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action’. As a matter of fact, the way the medium is used is irrelevant because it is not the content that modifies the patterns or pace of human affairs. Fashion is the ultimate message in the photo shoot sequence, and it would be misleading to think of it as concealing an allegedly more important truth than itself. Fashion is the meaning, and there is no ‘beyond’ in this signifier – no pure, uncontaminated humanity to refer to. This works, I suggest, to further undermine the possibility of an un-fashioned body as a shrine of authenticity and biological purity that does not operate under the logic of cultural and technological mediation.

In the next phase of my discussion, I will call attention to the radicalization of the notion of the fashioned body emerging from Speaking Parts. In subsection 2.2.2, I explained the rationale behind my intention to rethink strategies of fashion for the present study, so as to include ways of surgically altering the human body. I would like to start by noting that Egoyan’s representation of the drama of organ transplantation may seem unconventional when compared to other films from Europe and North America that centre on a transplantation narrative. Ryan Prout’s analysis of cinematic accounts of organ donation invites us to reflect on the inherent ambivalence of transplantation as a procedure in which joy and tragedy are inextricably combined, and in which altruism is often bound with particularistic ties and issues of national identity.

In Egoyan’s film, the theme of organ transplantation presents very specific characteristics. It is, first of all, a gesture of love and compassion that merges bodies together to the point where they become totally indistinguishable. It could be argued that it carries the wedding discourse to extremes, breaching the integrity of the body to experience intimacy to the utmost. Too much closeness, however, can be deadly, and Clarence’s death reconfigures the transplantation as another example of failed technological

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117 Passage transcribed from film.
118 McLuhan, p. 9.
119 McLuhan, pp. 7-9.
mediation. My premise here is that the fundamental ambivalence of the transplantation procedure serves as a metaphor for the way in which Egoyan approaches mediating technologies in general: a vehicle to reach out to the other, and, at the same time, a threat to stability and bodily integrity, unless a certain degree of suspicion and distance is maintained.

In comparison with Blow-Up, which, as we have seen, questions the very existence of an un-fashioned body, the technology that figures in Speaking Parts is more invasive in scope and nature. Organ transplantation brings to the forefront the pointlessness of our attempts at clearly defining the boundaries of the human body. Not unlike the Antonioni of Blow-Up, Egoyan is particularly concerned with how the body appears, and most notably, with how its appearance may or may not be related to its feelings, emotions, and memories. Following Clarence’s sacrifice, his relationship with Clara has been crystallised – as Beard puts it, ‘definitely frozen and idealized and projected into an emotional landscape of eternal and eternally unreachable desire.”¹²¹ Just as in the episode of the father who cries in front of the diegetic camera, we are confronted with unanswerable questions about what our aesthetic, visual, and medical technologies can effectively mediate, and what they cannot.

In Speaking Parts, transplantation surgery is about a society struggling to reconcile deeply human values and behaviours with an extraordinary revolution in the way individuals perceive themselves. Burnett defines transplantation as a fascinating metaphor emphasising that ‘bodies – whether dead or alive – are interchangeable.”¹²² Echoing his view, Wilson sees the replacement of body parts as a reflection of the intricate play of mirroring and doubling that links characters with one another.¹²³ The fact that any organ can be replanted in a different body, I suggest, also implies that humans are hybrids of disconnected pieces. Organs are machine-like, functioning, replaceable and disposable in the same way that clothes are. The living parts of a person can be subject to disease independently, and be offered as a ‘gift’ to others. In Speaking Parts, transplantation is also a microcosm of the polluting aspects of technological mediation. Sociological studies have shown that, during this procedure, the sanctity of the individual self is violated on multiple levels: conventional boundaries between people are trespassed, the living are merged with the

¹²² Burnett, pp. 9-22 (p. 17).
¹²³ Wilson, Atom Egoyan, p. 43.
dead, and the donor’s body is eventually left mutilated. What makes this scenario particularly ambivalent is the fact that the lung transplantation actually enables Clara to survive. It is not enough, however, to permit a real ‘feeling for the other’: one can have somebody else’s organ incorporated, and still experience an insurmountable distance.

Medical anthropologist Cecil Helman’s definition of ‘modern industrial body’ provides a useful theoretical framework for an understanding of the surgically re-fashioned body in Speaking Parts. Moreover, it invites us to interpret the fictional talk show as a crucial instrument for mediating the social impact of organ donations. Helman provides a broad overview of the creation of artificial bodies in twentieth-century popular culture, linking contemporary televisual representations of ‘spare part’ surgery with a tradition in popular culture that goes back to early horror films and science fiction stories. According to him, in all these apparently diverse cultural forms lies an attempt to elicit a dialogue on the role of scientific knowledge, and on the evolving concepts of body and self. Helman identifies ‘the modern industrial body’ as that which is characterised by phenomena of implants – organs or parts of body made of synthetic materials – or transplants – organs, tissues, or parts of body taken from other bodies, either dead or alive. Implants and transplants, he points out, have not only blurred the boundaries between the human and the technological, but also epitomised an almost mythological struggle against the forces of nature – illness and ageing. Helman attributes the industrial nature of the new modern body to the fact that implant and transplant surgery demands advanced social organizations in order to be efficiently performed. As regards transplantation, the individual is permanently linked not only to ‘the medical team and the operators of diagnostic technology’, but also to the donor, whether it be it an unknown dead person or a close relative.

Egoyan’s film reminds us that new types of bodily and social defilement require new forms of transition rituals. Helman regards fictionalised accounts of transplantation (particularly in televisual formats, such as documentaries or talk

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127 Helman, p. 15.
shows) as performing a function of collective negotiation and mediation. In enacting conflicting as well as consensual scenarios, they encourage people to adjust to the reconfigurations of body and society that transplantation surgery entails:

The images of the coherent body and the coherent ‘self’ have both fragmented. On one, rather obvious, level, the body has been reconceptualized as a ‘machine’ (and machines re-conceptualized as ‘people’), with medicine’s task as the replacement of ‘new parts for old’.

The Producer insists on turning Clara’s clichéd script into a television talk show. Starting off as a carnivalesque confrontation, the fake show gradually develops into a hallucinated assemblage of disconnected shots, held together by frenetic editing, and culminating with Clara’s surreal suicide. It may be worth paying attention to the symbolism of the transplanted organ here, the lung, which indicates a way out of this labyrinth of mediation and loss. If the fetishized image is obsessively linked to the disappearance of the body, what does the combination of image and words suggest? The concept of ‘speaking part’ might be understood in this sense, as raising questions about artifice and deception in cinema. Chapter One discussed the contaminating aspects of vocal expression in The Adjuster and Il deserto rosso; in Speaking Parts, the voice is a physical manifestation of the uniqueness of the human self, as well as a crucial element of an actor’s performance.

‘There’s nothing special about words’ – Lisa tells us. When words fail to mediate between body and world, speaking parts are sterile and pointless, as Lance’s uncommunicative audition suggests. At the same time, however, words are more capable of eliciting emotions than media technologies. During the wedding party, Trish is brought to tears by Lisa’s questions, and her emotional response seems far more credible than that of the father previously interviewed and filmed by Eddy. Ontologically, the image is too unstable to be trusted, but what about the voice? The sound of each voice is unique because it is contingent on its physical source, the body. If the image has turned humans into ghosts, then the voice, by making them audible, can represent one way of rescuing the body from its fragmented state. Significantly, Clarence’s spectral

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128 Helman, p. 15.
129 Egoyan, Speaking Parts, p. 69.
footage lacks any diegetic sound: his essence remains unreachable. Breathing, by contrast, dominates the soundtrack in the masturbation sequence, and is further emphasised by the sound that we hear during the opening credits – a ‘mechanized breathing’, as Wilson calls it.\textsuperscript{130} Placed at the crossroad of converging storylines, Lance’s shout profoundly differs from the one that terrifies Giuliana in \textit{Il deserto rosso}. The shout of Speaking Parts marks a crucial narrative moment of resistance and self-affirmation leading to one of the few haptic moments of successful mediation in Egoyan’s early features: the embrace between Lance and Lisa. Identifying ‘the absence of touch’ as the main subject of the film, Wilson reads this scene as a response to Clara and Lisa’s pursuit of ‘real presence, tactile contact as they encounter loss of substance in the act of viewing and, still more painfully, in the act of mourning.’\textsuperscript{131} Reduced to a black, two-dimensional surface, the two merging figures finally allow a more emotional reading of the body, achieved via affection and tactility.

One could also see, in the transplantation theme, a parallel with discourses on migration and border crossing, which I shall explore more in depth in Chapter Three. Anthropologist Mary Douglas theorised the fundamental symbolism between body and society, positing that we cannot understand rituals concerning the body unless we are prepared ‘to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.’\textsuperscript{132} Significantly, Renée C. Fox, Laurence J. O’Connell, and Stuart J. Youngner highlight the frequent use of figurative language to refer to rejection phenomena in transplantation:

\begin{quote}
We were struck, for example, by the at-once military and anthropomorphic nature of all the immunological references to the ‘invasion’ of the body by ‘foreign’ tissue, its capacity to ‘recognize’ such tissue as ‘nonself’, and to the confrontation between ‘killer’ cells and ‘helper’ cells that this defensive recognition evokes.\textsuperscript{133}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{130} Wilson, \textit{Atom Egoyan}, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{131} Wilson, \textit{Atom Egoyan}, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{133} Fox, O’Connell, and J. Youngner, pp. 3-18 (p. 7).
Helman comes to similar conclusions when he notes that discourses on immigration have adopted the vocabulary of organ transplantation, and vice versa:

Thus immigrants ‘transplanted’ from one country to another may – as ‘foreign bodies’ – encounter a range of receptions from the ‘host community’: ‘tolerance’, ‘hypersensitivity’, or even ‘rejection’.¹³⁴

For Helman, the new industrial body denotes a new type of society in which heterogeneous groups of people are held together by an ‘industrial body politic’ – for ‘[t]he parallel for replaceable body parts is […] replaceable people, particularly in the workforce.’¹³⁵ This further demonstrates how closely issues of technological mediation and contamination are intertwined, and the degree to which they can be used to discuss issues of intimacy and distance at a number of levels.

Through their varied renditions of technology, Blow-Up and Speaking Parts raise the question whether mediation in itself can really provide proximity and reciprocity, or whether it ends up increasing the experience of distance and separation. As soon as one reaches extreme closeness, everything begins to dissolve or disintegrate. This is why, in the end, successful mediation is all about finding that liminal position that allows one to connect without losing sight of the risks involved. Before filming his young son Arshile in the short A Portrait of Arshile (1995), Egoyan expressed his feelings of ambivalence towards the desire to represent and transmit private memories on video. The filmmaker’s anxiety is indicative of how mediating technologies function more as a divisive rather than a unifying factor. In the following section, I will be further developing these concepts through a framework of poststructuralist criticism, focusing in particular on the interaction between discourses on death and the image.

### 2.3 Dismantling the Integrity of the Image

As attention shifts back to technologies of vision, this section draws on Derrida’s and Wilson’s reflections on ghostliness and mortality in order to address the

¹³⁴ Helman, p. 16.
¹³⁵ Helman, p. 16.
breaking of the integrity of the image. I shall begin by discussing the dialectics of visibility and invisibility articulated by technologically mediated images, and then move on to analyse the resonances of the corpse. Adopting diverse theories, including Barthes’s work on photography and Kristeva’s notion of abjection, I will explore how Blow-Up and Speaking Parts introduce the boundary between life and death in relation to mediating technologies, focusing in particular on the relationship between processes of bodily decomposition and pixelation of the image texture. Using the ghost and the cadaver as methodological and analytical tools will help me to navigate the semiotic and ontological problems that the films pose, correlating phenomena of contamination such as haunting and decay with a lack of belief in the power of technologies of vision to capture the true face of reality.

2.3.1 Ghostliness

In the previous section, I analysed strategies of dress in Blow-Up and Speaking Parts, employing the notion of fashioned body as a conduit for thinking about new ways of altering the human body in the posthuman age. Medical surgery and practices of dress share the fact that they deal with living bodies. Still images, by contrast, represent bodies that, for several critics, carry the sign of death: in capturing a moment that will not be lived again, they are a reminder of the transience of human existence.

While my analysis of the fashioned body in Blow-Up was centred on a series of subsidiary episodes, here I will focus on the narrative nucleus of the film, which consists of Thomas photographing the couple in the park, and exploring the resulting images. The first sequence of enlargements, interrupted by the interlude with the young aspiring models, results in the discovery of the gunman in the bushes: at this stage, Thomas believes he has saved a man’s life. Lotman emphasises that, by segmenting the scene into discrete and dissected units, the photographer is extracting the message from its temporal and causal context, opening the way for various conjectures about what happened in the park. To begin with, the narrative rearrangement of the visual data cuts from the text the mediating presence of the photographer himself, thus rejecting our previous conviction that he was the cause of the woman’s
apprehension. In retrospect, Jane may have been disturbed by her view of an armed man in the bushes.\footnote{Lotman, pp. 99-100.} The second series of enlargements reveals the presence of a supine body in the grass. The protagonist’s earlier hypothesis is thus proved wrong – he did not prevent a murder, but rather witnessed one without noticing. When Thomas goes back to the park, without his camera, the corpse seems to be there. He touches it. Yet the following morning, when he reaches the spot again, this time with his camera, he finds that the body has disappeared. A certain ghostliness haunts the film and its protagonist, whose pursuit of truth via photographic documentation results in a phantasmagoria of horror and murder. Eventually, he accepts the tennis game as real, to the point that he throws back to the mimes the imaginary ball, and the sound of what is not happening is perfectly audible.

Instances of photographic proliferation in Blow-Up, as we have seen, correspond to an abundance of video screens in Speaking Parts. In Egoyan’s dystopian universe, video recording also serves as a memorial to deceased loved ones. This, I suggest, encourages speculation not only on the capacity of media technologies to record and extend the appearance of life beyond death, but also on the power of such representational practices to engender a haunting sense of threat upon the living. Harcourt maintains that, in Egoyan’s third feature film, ‘the ubiquity of television images is associated with morbidity and death.’ The televisual processes, he continues, ‘consistently lead to a death-desiring nostalgia for something that is either not really there (the indifferent Lance) or no longer there (Clara’s dead brother).’\footnote{Harcourt, ‘Imaginary Images’, pp. 7-8.} What makes Clarence’s footage particularly eerie is, besides the absence of diegetic sound, the repetition of absence and presence that his constant pacing back and forth evokes. This, as Wilson has argued, allows ‘a rehearsal of loss’ that is reminiscent of the Fort-da game discussed by Freud.\footnote{Wilson, Atom Egoyan, p. 39.} For Burnett, the video images in the mausoleum, played over and over, ‘are a reminder of all that is absent. Clarence’s smile and walk remain frozen in time. His gestures become a ghostly reminder of death rather than a release from its effects.’\footnote{Burnett, pp. 9-22 (p. 19).} These references to ghostliness and death, significantly expanded by the work of Wilson, have inspired this part of my research, in which I shift from the cyborg to
the ghost metaphor. My discussion of Speaking Parts, in particular, will be deeply indebted to Wilson’s monograph on Egoyan, where she draws on Derrida’s interviews with Bernard Stiegler in Echographies of Television.\(^\text{140}\) Most recently, in Love, Mortality and the Moving Image, Wilson has further developed these themes, engaging them in a dialogue with the work of Judith Butler and Giorgio Agamben.\(^\text{141}\)

Analyses of Blow-Up in relation to the ontological status of photography pinpoint concepts of factuality, authenticity, and context as the subjects of Antonioni’s artistic discourse. Lotman insists on the importance of not equating the director with his hero, whom he regards as more of a ‘modern chronicler’ than an artist, a seeker of facts with the ambition of capturing the essence of contemporary urban life ‘in unposed, un-arranged, and documentary-like situations.’\(^\text{142}\) Lotman calls attention to the meta-semiotic qualities of Blow-Up as a filmic text that self-consciously addresses the problem of interpreting photographic signs, and theorises about the twofold function of the cinematic image: ‘[o]n the one hand, it denotes the reality which is photographed. With respect to reality, photography functions as a reproduction.’ On the other hand, he continues, one should not forget about the nature of film as an artistic text, and therefore, as a system of signs that must be deciphered. With respect to this text, ‘still photographs function as something considerably more authentic and indisputable, functionally equivalent to reality itself.’\(^\text{143}\) Scholarly accounts of Blow-Up that posit the idea of photography as a document, or as a source of information, are nonetheless aware that Antonioni’s intertextual discourse throws into question the image as a complex form of mediation and representation. Chatman, for whom photographs serve as ‘visual records of the actual’, acknowledges that the protagonist’s manipulation puts the medium to an ‘esthetic, hence fictional’ use.\(^\text{144}\) As Nardelli reminds us, many critics have pointed out that Blow-Up’s epistemological allegory transcends the ontology of reality as captured in photography (and, by extension, in cinema),


\(^\text{142}\) Lotman, pp. 97-103.

\(^\text{143}\) Lotman, pp. 97-98.

\(^\text{144}\) Chatman, Antonioni, p. 143.
encompassing the ambiguity of reality as such, and our hold on it.\(^{145}\) I suggest that this film invites us to question the very possibility of perceiving the real in isolation from the strategies of mediation to which it is inextricably linked, and which inevitably relativise its meaning. Even entering into tactile relationships with objects is no guarantee of authenticity in the world of Blow-Up. This aspect, which strongly emerges in relation to the encounter with the corpse, makes Antonioni’s insight into mediating practices notably radical when compared to Egoyan’s.

Not unlike the characters in Speaking Parts, Antonioni’s protagonist has built his life around the camera as a mechanical enhancement of sight. For Chatman, he ‘uses his photographic skills to see more than the naked human eye is supposed to see’.\(^{146}\) As a result, Blow-Up emphasises how technologies of vision may eventually disguise the truth, rather than help its revelation. Thomas’s detective work comes to the realisation that the grainy enlargements are nothing but opaque and indefinite texts. His obstinate search for realism has the effect of revealing the contingent traces of technological mediation as a catalyst for ambivalence and a source of deathly contamination. Due to their indexical nature, photographic and video processes are traditionally granted a unique ability to register reality and provide documentary evidence. Yet ultimately, the photographer’s unconditional faith in his medium is revealed as a form of distortion that gives birth to photographic panoplies of ghostly entities.

In Antonioni’s film, contamination spreads at multiple levels: firstly, within the image itself, where the unknowable nature of the real generates weightless haunting presences, ectoplasmic shadows, and impalpable apparitions of un-referential bodies. Secondly, the aesthetic regime imposed by photographic representation seems to have affected the protagonist’s behaviour at a social level. The contaminating force of Thomas’s misuse of the camera is reflected in his exploitative and manipulative attitude towards the models. In subsection 2.2.3, I showed that a delusional investment in mediating practices of dress prefigures the impossibility of reaching the other in corporeal and emotional terms.

Furthermore, if we consider Blow-Up in relation to the development of Antonioni’s style, the implicit opposition between photographer and filmmaker

\(^{145}\) Nardelli, pp. 185-205 (pp. 186-187).

\(^{146}\) Chatman, Antonioni, p. 142.
can be broadly associated with two different types of artistic sensibilities, or modes in cinematography. With regard to this, Lotman notes that ‘the hero is on the level of the life which he chronicles’, which means that he has an extraordinary ability to disguise and dissolve into the various environments he comes across: in the doss-house he is a tramp, at the Yardbirds’ concert he grabs the broken guitar neck, and at the drug party he gets drunk. What Thomas lacks, for Lotman, is an ‘external viewpoint of events’, a ‘solid foundation’ from which to make sense of what he sees: in other words, he is not an artist.\textsuperscript{147} Interestingly enough, for Chatman it is quite the other way around: Thomas is a ‘gifted artist’, and his photographs of the homeless ‘are not genuine social records but elements of an artist’s vision of the city’.\textsuperscript{148} Such a divergence of interpretation is suggestive, especially if we look at it in the context of photography’s progressive establishment as an art form. From my perspective, Blow-Up evokes a certain degree of methodological leakage between two different ways of viewing – that of the documentarist, embodied by the photographer (a precursor of the reporter in The Passenger), and that of the artist/director. Another way to look at the notion of contamination is therefore in terms of film aesthetic: Thomas’s investigative activity implies some form of artistic re-elaboration, which results in the creation of a personal reconstitution of events. More importantly, as the protagonist’s final disappearance in the artificially coloured grass reminds us, the cinematic image itself is not providing any empirical evidence of Thomas’s existence. Antonioni’s film leaves us with the uncanny realisation that, so far, we have witnessed the events in the life of a phantasm, and the closing shot confronts us, emblematically, with the dissolution of the visual trace of his indexical realism.

Spectrality is a manifestation of the loss of corporeality that is endemic to the experiential regimes of photography and video. I would argue that a ghostly, insubstantial dimension of existence hovers over Blow-Up and Speaking Parts: such a dimension is endowed with the power to proliferate indefinitely, invading and infecting the apparently controlled world of the protagonists. In Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, Barthes theorises portrait photography as a rehearsal or anticipation of death. He gives a personal account of the role of photography whose main foundation – the photographic reality effect, the

\textsuperscript{147} Lotman, p. 103.
\textsuperscript{148} Chatman, Antonioni, pp. 142-143.
The concept that ‘in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there’ – is undermined by Antonioni’s artistic discourse, and becomes more and more problematic as the analogue image gives way to the digital one. Nevertheless, there are still significant elements of Barthes’s analysis that speak directly to the cultural order established and sustained by the pervasiveness of photographic reproduction in Antonioni’s film, with particular regard to its spectral effects. As Barthes writes:

Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death. Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print.

Portrait photography, for Barthes, represents the moment in which ‘I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object.’ The author describes the photographic process as ‘a micro-version of death’, during which the subject ‘is truly becoming a spectre’. To theorise the phantomatic qualities of photographic reproduction, Barthes draws attention to the series of material contiguities linking the photographic referent with the observer’s gaze: ‘[a] sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.’ Special emphasis is placed on the materiality of the process. The fact that one is touched by the photographic referent, but is not able to touch it, engenders a sense of irreversibility that gives way to a ghostly effect. Barthes’s notion of ghostliness offers a useful framework for thinking about deadliness in a context of obsolescence of the biological body; however, it is important to underline that here he refers to still images exclusively. It is Derrida, as I will shortly illustrate, who extends this paradigm to the filmic image.

Posing in front of a lens means, for Barthes, making another body for oneself, and preparing to become an image. In Blow-Up, photography’s deadly effect is echoed by the models’ process of posing, as well as by the

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150 Barthes, Camera Lucida, p. 92, author’s emphasis.
152 Barthes, Camera Lucida, pp. 80-81.
153 Barthes, Camera Lucida, p. 10.
stillness of the sculpture busts which enrich the film’s *mise-en-scène*. Because of the importance it grants to immobility, Barthes’s discourse does not apply to the moving image: ‘in the cinema […] there is always a photographic referent, but this referent shifts, it does not make a claim in favor of its reality, it does not protest its former existence; it does not cling to me: it is not a *specter*.’ As Wilson suggests, Derrida’s observations on death and film can indicate interesting ways of expanding on themes of ghostliness so that these can be applied also to the haunting video apparitions in *Speaking Parts*.

In ‘Spectrographies’, Stiegler evokes a scene from the film *Ghost Dance* (Ken McMullen, 1983) where Derrida, who plays himself, improvises a dialogue with actress Pascale Ogier:

> To be haunted by a ghost is to remember what one has never lived in the present, to remember what, in essence, has never had the form of presence. Film is a ‘phantomachia’. Let the ghosts come back. […] Modern technology, contrary to appearances, although it is scientific, increases tenfold the power of ghosts. The future belongs to ghosts.

A ghost is an evanescent, abstract body that is not really present in flesh and blood. Spectres, Derrida reminds us, are closely related to spectacle (the term comes from the Latin word for ‘image’, ‘appearance’ – *spectrum*). Egoyan said that the notion of glamour is crucial to understand *Speaking Parts*: being interested in someone who does not return our interest, someone who demands to be looked at, without looking back at us. The paradox here is that communication technologies, despite being an expression of technical and scientific knowledge, confuse the phenomenal with the non-phenomenal, augmenting the ability of ghosts to haunt us. Derrida recalls how, watching the scene years later, after Ogier’s premature death, he experienced ‘the unnerving sense of the return of her specter’. The question he posed to her – ‘do you believe in ghosts?’ – and her answer – ‘now I do, absolutely’ – have taken on new disturbing overtones. Ogier’s image does not simply substitute absence for presence, but rather absence for absence, for the impossibility to respond to

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154 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 89, author’s emphasis.
158 *Speaking Parts*, DVD commentary by Egoyan.
159 Derrida and Stiegler, pp. 113-134 (p. 120).
160 Passage transcribed from film.
her gaze is multiplied ad infinitum. Derrida goes beyond this: he suggests that this process of spectrality was triggered at the very moment when they shot the scene, since Ogier could easily envisage that one day she would be a dead woman, and that her gaze on screen would somehow transcend its referent and exist in an autonomous fashion, as a ‘dissymmetrical’ gaze:

[B]ecause we know that, once it has been taken, captured, this image will be reproducible in our absence, because we know this already, we are already haunted by this future, which brings our death. Our disappearance is already here. We are already transfixied by a disappearance [une disparition] which promises and conceals in advance another magic ‘apparition’, a ghostly ‘re-apparition’ which is in truth properly miraculous, something to see, as admirable as it is incredible [incroyable], believable [croyable] only by the grace of an act of faith. Faith which is summoned by technics itself, by our relation of essential incompetence to technical operation.

As Wilson notes, at the precise time when the Producer has removed her from the script, Clara ‘inserts herself into the memorial history where previously she has been an absent observer’. Her ghostlike appearance on the mausoleum tape is impossible and problematic: if she is not the author of the footage, who is it behind the non-diegetic camera that is thus uncannily revealed? Does Clara’s entering the diegetic frame also stand for her passing the threshold of afterlife – a herald, perhaps, of the later scene in which she points a gun at her head? Clara’s existence is forever anchored to the image, preserved as a past whose return is secured by video technology; by the same token, as Derrida’s reflections on spectrality indicate, this process of indexical registration also presages her approaching disappearance or death.

Derrida reminds us that photography and the moving image deprive us, first of all, of tactile sensitivity. In visual encounters with dead people, however, lack of reciprocity is not limited to the sphere of touch, but intensified by other factors. The French philosopher conceives of the spectre not only as a figure we watch, but also as someone who watches us ‘without any possible symmetry, without reciprocity, insofar as the other is watching only us, concerns only us, we who are observing it […] without even being able to meet his

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161 Derrida and Stiegler, pp. 113-134 (p. 120).
163 Wilson, Atom Egoyan, p. 44.
In her analysis of *Speaking Parts*, Wilson describes the lack of reciprocity in encounters with deceased loved ones as a manifestation of ‘the lack of relation that fascinates Egoyan more generally as he dramatizes passion unrequited’.

In Egoyan’s cinematic universe, I contend, the more a message is emotionally or affectively charged, the more technology reveals its inadequacy to mediate it. The uncontrollable proliferation of ghostly entities could be seen as a toxic side effect of this failure. Moreover, processes of spectrality offer an interesting view on the intricate play of doubles that characterises the film. The hotel world seems to be endowed with the power to conjure up people’s dreams and memories: Clara, for instance, sees in Lance the re-apparition of her brother. This prompts her to explore the forbidden areas of their relationship, which she probably would have never dared to explore in real life.

The Producer’s comment about the hotel as a ‘special’ and ‘intimate’ place may be conceived of also in this way, as an allusion to the possible materialisations of one’s most secret fantasies.

Another spectral presence is that of the ‘special’ guest, which provides a useful point of connection with the focus of my next subsection, the corpse. The guest of room 106 is marked by lack of reciprocity on several levels: firstly, he or she is invisible, and secondly, his or her suicide is presumably motivated by an unrequited love for Lance. During the talk-show sequence, as the editing pace intensifies, we view shots of Lance smiling at Lisa from a surveillance monitor, and inviting her to join him on screen. In the background, perhaps as a visual reference to Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), we finally glimpse part of the guest’s corpse on the bathroom floor. The relationship of cadavers to ghosts is one of materiality versus immateriality, absence of the human versus absence of the body. If a corpse is decipherable by dissection, a spectre is impossible to interact with. Corporeal or incorporeal detritus of former lives, cadavers and ghosts are specially invested with polluting powers. Watching a corpse is about being confronted by tabooed subjects, seeing a spectre is about seeing the invisible; in any case, the gaze that is articulated is always a subversive one. As the debris of technological mediation begins to surface, immaterial defilement suddenly and unexpectedly leads to physical decomposition, opening the way for encounters with the corporeal facet of death. In the following subsection, I

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165 Derrida and Stiegler, pp. 113-134 (p. 120).
167 *Speaking Parts*, DVD commentary by Egoyan.
shall turn to investigate the two corpses of the films in relation to Kristeva’s theory of abjection.

2.3.2 Decomposition

I wish to begin by calling attention to the two sequences in Blow Up and Speaking Parts where the dead body dramatically appears. In doing so, I will highlight the significance of the notion of decomposition as a form of contamination that conflates two dynamically interrelated levels: body and image. This approach aims to provide a new perspective from which to read the two films, emphasising the similarities in their reconfiguration of abjection, but also taking into account the specificities of their epilogues.

In Blow-Up and Speaking Parts, the corpse combines physical and ghostly factors: one mysteriously vanishes before the photographer can obtain a tangible proof of its existence; the other is only partially visible on a screen that merges with Lisa’s hallucinations. One difference is therefore that, while in Antonioni’s film the corpse eludes photographic representation, in Egoyan’s the diegetic video image acts as a catalyst for Lisa’s encounter with her dead other. In spite of this, one could also argue that these moments of contamination by death occur exactly when we experience the failure of the image as a mediator. Viewers, as well as characters, never really know if what they see is dream or reality: more than ever before, the image seems to be precarious, unreliable, and ontologically unstable.

For Kristeva, the corpse is a site of abjection, whose horror stems from the fact that a living being suddenly becomes an inert, inanimate object. Yet at the same time, seeing a corpse triggers a process of bodily identification: paradoxically, in that image of otherness we also see a subject, a disturbing reflection of ourselves.\footnote{Kristeva, Powers of Horror, pp. 3-4.} As I aim to demonstrate, the corpses of Blow-Up and Speaking Parts tell us something crucial about the nature of images. I shall now discuss to what extent Kristeva’s theoretical framework is applicable to these films, and what it can suggest in terms of disclosure of the human body as earthly and profoundly mortal. In my analysis of Il deserto rosso and The Adjuster, I employed a notion of contamination that draws on both Bauman’s
studies on ambivalence and liquid modernity, and Kristeva’s theory of abjection. More specifically, I examined how worlds of chemical industry and pornography cause impurity to break out and infect the realm of the family home. Here, I will go back to the same concepts through the vortex of abjection that, as Kristeva indicates, lies in corporeal waste, and most notably, in the corpse-body.

Looking at the history of religions, and the ways in which taboos and pollution rites took on the task of warding off the danger of abjection, Kristeva discusses the passage of filth to the ritual level of defilement, and identifies corporeal waste as a metaphor for the frailty of symbolic order. In doing so, she acknowledges the centrality of the work of Douglas, who claimed that impurity does not represent a quality in itself, but is constituted in relation to a boundary, a margin: defilement is what disobeys rationality and classification, what is jettisoned from a specific structural system. Pollution is what defies the symbolic realm. Prohibited objects, Kristeva notes, fall into two schematic categories: excremental (representing a danger to identity that issues from without), and menstrual (representing a danger that comes from within sexual and social identity). The corpse, which belongs to the first category, sets off abjection in that it causes a major rupture in the ultimate border between life and death: ‘[i]t is death infecting life.’ As Kristeva reminds us, the term cadaver is akin to ‘cadere’, to fall. Decomposition erodes bodily margins, and coming face-to-face with a corpse is being somehow engulfed by it, having my own borders violated:

Deprived of world, therefore, I fall in a faint. In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue’s full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away.

Those who are faced with a corpse experience the transiency of the human condition: ‘the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death.’ Not unlike portrait photography for Barthes, or the filmic image for Derrida, the corpse abjectly reminds us of ‘[t]hat elsewhere that I imagine

170 Douglas, pp. xvi-xviii.
172 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, pp. 3-4, author’s emphasis.
beyond the present’. It acts, to put it in another way, as a traumatic rehearsal for the day when I shall cease to be: ‘[i]f dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, “I” is expelled.’\(^{174}\) What goes out of the body’s orifices, for Kristeva, ‘points to the infinitude of the body proper’, and denotes a condition of constant loss that is necessary for the self not only to create, but also to maintain, the limits of its own individual identity.\(^{175}\)

In the biblical text, Kristeva notes, the corpse is among the objects of abomination: ‘transitional matter, mixture’, the cadaver is ‘the opposite of the spiritual, of the symbolic, and of divine law’, and therefore represents essential pollution. Without a soul, the corpse is a non-body which must be promptly buried so as to prevent it from infecting the earth: ‘[a] decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming, inseparable lining of a human nature whose life is undistinguishable from the symbolic.’\(^{176}\)

In her analysis of objectuality in Blow Up, Rascaroli refers to Kristeva’s theory of abjection, arguing that, by framing together the corpse and the photographer, ‘Antonioni shows us the object in its value as inhuman copy of the subject, in the encounter with which the subject experiences the fascination of the horror, of the non-human, and runs the risk of dissolution, with all the necessary references to Kristeva.’\(^{177}\) The association between cadaver and object, however, may be a problematic one: if we fully accept Kristeva’s framework, and therefore read the corpse as abject, then the murdered man in the park is not an object, but a jettisoned object. As Kristeva puts it, we can protect ourselves from an object, but do not have such luck with the abject. If this encounter, on the one hand, annihilates me, and leads to the breakdown of all meanings, on the other, it is also the safeguard of my own subjectivity – to use Kristeva’s words, ‘[t]he primers of my culture’.\(^{178}\)

I would like to draw attention to a fundamental incompatibility between Kristeva’s theory of abjection and the representations of dead bodies in Blow

\(^{177}\) Rascaroli, pp. 64-81 (p. 77).
*Up* and *Speaking Parts*. As I am going to show, this incongruity can be a useful resource to identify the similarities between the two films in terms of their rendition of abjection in a context of media proliferation and obsolescence of the biological body. Despite converging on a scene of corporeal death, neither of the narratives gives us a full explanation as to why the corpse is there: it remains, in many respects, an ambiguous and unclear presence. The impossibility to frame the cadaver within a logical plot, where the relationship between the events is causal and undisputable, results in an increase of its abject qualities. More importantly, by applying Kristeva’s theory, one also realises that both films completely lack that imagery of repulsion and visceral horror that the body as waste always implies. There is no such thing as intolerable loathing and disgust in Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s reconfigurations of the corpse, no trace of the gory body-horror that, as discussed in subsection 2.2.1, Cronenberg makes use of to tackle very similar issues. Clean, elegant, perfectly dressed, and with his eyes wide open, the murdered body discovered by Thomas is deliberately not real (figure 2.b). It could be one of his glamorous fashion models, posing for a photobook in his studio. Rather than an abject, horrific corpse, it is a *fashioned* corpse: not actual, but signified death. In *Speaking Parts*, the presence of the corpse is even more mediated, filtered through the pixelated membrane of the diegetic video screen (figure 2.c). Once again, death is staged – and this time, even more literally: this shot, in fact, could be an intertextual reference to Marion Crane’s lifeless body on the bathroom floor in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*.

I previously hinted at how the cadaver in *Blow Up* defies photographic representation; however, I would not consider this as a sign that the murdered body must be taken as a bearer of truth. On the contrary, its artificially purified appearance indicates the extent to which strategies of performance and mediation are already an inextricable part of Thomas’s world. The video image, which in *Speaking Parts* was supposed to preserve the permanence of life after death, ultimately reveals the truth of the body’s mortality. The most important similarity between the two films therefore lies in their displacement of abjection, from the biological body to the decomposed, fragmented texture of the image. Indeed, we do not find the abject in the cadaver, as much as in the horror of mechanical representation, and in the solipsism and narcissism it has triggered.
in society. This arguably implies that technological mediation is never a pure, controlled, and painless process.

Notions of closeness and proximity, as we have seen, play a crucial role in disclosing the ontological precariousness of bodies and images. At the level of cinematography, Blow-up’s photographic enlargements and the movement towards abstraction that they articulate find a correspondence in Egoyan’s questioning of the cinematic close-up (significantly, the theme of the face will return also in The Passenger and Next of Kin, see subsection 3.2.2). These are significant moments in which the integrity of the image is breached. Surfaces generate other surfaces, figuration becomes unstable, while definite subjects oscillate between ghostliness and material decomposition. In Visible Man, Béla Balázs claims that the close-up is the ‘true terrain’ of film, ‘a mute pointing to important and significant detail, while at the same time providing an interpretation of the life depicted.’

The cinematic close-up conventionally marks a privileged moment of access to the meaning of a character. For Balázs, it has a poetic, lyrical charm. It shows us a facial expression that is a manifestation of the human ‘soul’ – a ‘lyricism made objective’ by the mediation of the camera itself.

The flickering, pulverised close-ups that we find in Egoyan’s film radically disrupt this notion. The particulars of the face that traditionally serve as a site of emotional expression have lost their readability. This is evident, for instance, in the pixelated texture of Lance’s close-up, which appears on Lisa’s television screen at the beginning of the film, or in a later scene, during her hallucinations. I would therefore assert that, while the corpse is a sterile and aseptic entity, the process of optical expansion acts as the real catalyst for decomposition and contamination in both Blow-Up and Speaking Parts. Closeness renders the very skin of the image abject. This is where the definite loses itself in the abstract, and technological mediation is revealed as an artificial, fallible, and arbitrary practice.

All these concepts find a powerful echo in the films’ denouements. In Blow-Up, the ambiguous presence of the mimes hints at questions of disguise and performance, and reminds us of the very thin line between reality and fiction. As Chatman suggests, the conclusion that the photographer reaches is ‘of no greater substance than the mimes’ imaginary tennis rackets and ball,

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180 Balázs, pp. 38-45 (p. 44).
which are the materials of their art.’ This leads Chatman to infer that ‘[c]oherence is always man-made: the universe offers us nothing but chaos.’\textsuperscript{181} Similarly, Brunette reads the imaginary tennis match as an indication that ‘reality is always constructed, and constructed socially’, and calls attention to the importance of context in the establishment of any meaning. The sound of the non-existent ball, and the photographer’s disappearance in the grass, are strategies that serve to emphasise the presence of cinematic codes, and thereby to signify that the film’s discourse on reality as an inter-subjective construction is extended to the spectators.\textsuperscript{182}

The endings of Blow-Up and Speaking Parts differ in terms of their treatment of the body in relation to the image. The mimes appear as the most radical fashioned bodies in Antonioni’s film. Unlike actors, mimes do not impersonate a character; with no history or identity, they rather represent the performance of an action in an abstract sense. Antonioni’s mimes denote an exaggeration of surfaces, pure embellishment – a medium with a transparent message. The director is arguably using the appearance of the fashioned body as a vehicle to deny its content. Moreover, through the invisibility of the ball and, eventually, of Thomas, Antonioni goes as far as to disavow the indexicality that we commonly associate with photography or cinema. It is interesting to note how, today, confronted with the specificities of the digital, this scene may attain a new level of meaning, which relates to the present evolution of the media (see also subsection 2.2.3).

The epilogue of Speaking Parts is radically different: it could be maintained that, if Antonioni accentuates the appearance of the body to deny its reality, Egoyan denies its appearance to accentuate its reality. The silhouetted figures of Lance and Lisa, as we have seen, are deprived of their solidity and of a visible surface, while successful mediation is permitted by touch. This divergence in the films’ final scenes echoes the duality of mimes and actors. The former are mute, the latter have a voice, a real ‘speaking part’: the effectiveness of their mediation with us, spectators, only depends on how they will use it.

\textsuperscript{181} Chatman, Antonioni, p. 152, author’s emphasis.
\textsuperscript{182} Brunette, pp. 117-118, author’s emphasis.
Chapter Three
Discarding the Unwanted Skin: *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin*

[T]here is no longer any such place as home: except, of course, for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz: which is anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from which we began.

Salman Rushdie

3.1 Two Stories of Invented Identities

*The Passenger* (1974) is the third and last film in Antonioni’s three-picture contract with Carlo Ponti/Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. The other two were *Blow-Up* and *Zabriskie Point*, which caused intense debate because of its portrayal of America and the post-1968 youth culture. Based on a script co-written by Mark Peploe, semiotician Peter Wollen, and Antonioni, *The Passenger* is shot in English and set in four different countries: Chad, England, Germany and Spain. This film, internationally renowned for the strong presence of New Hollywood actor Jack Nicholson, tells the story of a man who acquires the identity of a dead stranger. *Next of Kin*, Egoyan’s 1984 debut feature film, is another tale of invented identities that looks into the very nature of the interior self. It establishes what will become some of Egoyan’s distinctive motifs and stylistic features, particularly in terms of convoluted narrative constructions and a flat, detached acting style. The aim of this initial section is to delineate key aspects in the films’ storylines, so as to start identifying elements of continuity and diversity between them. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to a closer textual and comparative discussion that synthesises filmic analysis with pivotal critical frameworks. More specifically, I will be further developing the themes of mediation and contamination through the theories of nomadism, abjection, whiteness, and third space, including, eventually, some reflections on camera movement and spatiality.

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The Passenger begins with shots of a remote village somewhere in the Sahara desert, where David Locke (Jack Nicholson) tries unsuccessfully to communicate with some locals by giving them cigarettes. A guide leads him into the desert on foot, but vanishes when a caravan of government soldiers on camels appears. Locke goes back to his Land Rover, but the car soon gets stuck in the sand. He heads back to his hotel on foot. We later discover that Locke is a successful Anglo-American television journalist (a reporter, as the Italian version of the title, Professione: Reporter, indicates), and that he is trying in vain to track down a guerrilla movement – the United Liberation Front – engaged in a battle against the Chadian government.

On his return to the hotel, Locke finds that the man in the next room, David Robertson (Chuck Mulvehill), with whom he was also acquainted, has suddenly died from a heart attack. Locke, who, for some reason unknown to us, seems to be disenchanted with his own life, decides to take on Robertson’s identity. He meticulously switches hotel rooms, clothes, and passport photographs. While he is thus engaged, we start hearing an earlier conversation between the two men in voice-over. Since there is no clear indication as to where the voices come from, we are initially led to think that they are non-diegetic – a projection, perhaps, of Locke’s subjective memory. At some point, however, the camera cuts to a tape recorder nearby, reconfiguring the source of sound as diegetic. Then, panning across the room, it shows us flashback images of the actual moments when Locke and Robertson first met. Interestingly enough, Next of Kin adopts very similar cinematic strategies of dislocation in voice and image (to which I will turn later in this section), with comparable effects of contamination between diegetic and non-diegetic audio tracks. As a result, one could extend Brunette’s comment on Antonioni’s elaborate flashback to both films: ‘in addition to suggesting the fluidity of identity’, he argues, ‘the film here raises for the first time the question of …’

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2 To a certain extent, the lack of clear motivation as to why the protagonist is dissatisfied with his life as Locke might be due to the cuts that the director was forced to make by the American producers at MGM. The Passenger is available in two different versions, with American and European releases. The European cut includes two scenes that help clarify important aspects of the plot, particularly as regards Locke’s relationship with Rachel and the girl. In the first, we see the reporter returning to his house in London, where he finds an obituary of himself and a note to his wife left by her lover. The second scene that is missing from the original American version occurs later in the film, as Locke and the girl are resting in the lemon grove. At this point, he seems to want to stop the identity fraud, but the girl says that she is not interested in giving up, and eventually prompts him to continue their journey.
subjectivity versus objectivity." The sequence of the identity theft is also imbued with overt symbolism: water is configured as a signifier of rebirth not only in The Passenger, where we can hear the background sound of the shower coming from Locke’s hotel room, but also in Next of Kin, where the protagonist, in a hotel as well, orchestrates the transformation of himself into another person while taking a bath. It is interesting to note how the motif of washing creates a subtle dialogue between undertones of cleanliness and dirtiness, for purification and regeneration are allegorically evoked exactly when the performance of identity begins, and the self is being reconfigured as a zone of pollution and ambiguity.

The rest of Antonioni’s film consists of Locke travelling around Europe in the guise of Robertson, deciphering the dead man’s diary, and following his itinerary. We thus progress from Northern Africa to London, Munich to Barcelona, ending up in rural Spain. We watch the reaction of Locke’s wife and colleagues at the news of his death, and follow Martin Knight (Ian Hendry), Locke’s producer, as he searches old footage for a film tribute to his career. An intricate and unconventional work of editing, done by Antonioni and Franco Arcalli, intercuts Locke’s documentary work on the postcolonial conflicts in modern Africa with flashbacks from his former life. As Brunette reminds us, ‘[w]hat these flashbacks are concerned with is memory, specifically memory as a function of subjectivity and identity.’

In Munich, the reporter opens Robertson’s luggage locker and sees a briefcase stuffed with diagrams of guns and rifles. He then enters a church, and is approached by two men (Manfried Spies and Ambroise Bia), who think he is Robertson. Locke hands over to them the material he found in the luggage locker, and they give him an envelope of money as his first instalment. Then, the African leader, Achebe, tells Locke that they are indebted to him for his support to their cause. The reporter thus discovers the risks of his adopted profession: Robertson traded in weapons, and supported the Chadian revolutionary army in its fight for liberation. In a later scene, Achebe is abducted by a group of African government agents.

Locke waits fruitlessly for his next contact at the Umbraculo of the Parc de la Ciutadella, in Barcelona. Meanwhile, Locke’s estranged wife, Rachel

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3 Brunette, p. 131.
4 Brunette, p. 131.
(Jenny Runacre), has asked Knight to find the man who stayed at the same hotel as Locke, Robertson. The reporter sees Knight and escapes in the Palau Güell, an art nouveau building by the Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí. There he meets a young woman (Maria Schneider), unnamed in the film, a student of architecture that he already saw at the Bloomsbury Centre in London. On the roof of Gaudí’s Casa Milà, Locke convinces the girl to collect his personal belongings from the Hotel Oriente so that he can avoid Knight. They then leave together in his convertible.

In the London editing room, Rachel watches Locke’s archive film clips: an African political leader condemning the revolutionary forces in his country, the public execution of a rebel, and an interview with an African witch doctor (James Campbell). When the reporter asks the latter whether the contact with Western ideas has not rendered his practice obsolete, the witch doctor takes the camera and points it at Locke, making him visibly uncomfortable. In this way, Antonioni questions the status of the frame, and the tension between onscreen and off-screen space: what are the implications of restricting the camera’s field of vision or, conversely, of expanding it? What visual information is the reporter holding back from his spectators? More crucially, who has the right to step behind the threshold of the camera? The encounter with the witch doctor has the effect of revealing Locke’s subtly imperialistic stance, and contributes to the film’s overall unmasking of the illusion of ‘purity’, here understood as neutrality, documentary objectivity, and quest for some kind of absolute truth.

On receiving her husband’s personal belongings from Africa, Rachel is astonished to see the photo of another man on his passport. At the same time, Locke and the girl head for the next appointment in Robertson’s diary, at Plaza de la Iglesia. Due to the abduction of Achebe, however, no one turns up. African government agents looking for Robertson pursue Rachel, who, in turn, chases after Locke. He manages to avoid her in an Almeria hotel. Then, while trying to elude the police, he damages the car’s oil pan. Locke suggests that the girl should take a bus: they can meet in Tangiers in three days, if she decides to show up.

At the Hotel de la Gloria in Osuna, Locke finds the girl, registered as ‘Mrs. Robertson’, waiting for him. He tells her the story of a blind man who regained his sight by an operation; at first, he was enthusiastic, but then, he
started to notice all the dirt and ugliness in the world. After three years, he committed suicide. Locke proposes that the girl should leave. The penultimate scene is Antonioni’s renowned seven-minute long-take: the camera seems to travel through the bars of the hotel window to look outside. It pans 180 degrees around the dusty square, recording a number of random people and subsidiary events, until it tracks back into the hotel room, where, to our surprise, the assassination of Locke by two African agents has occurred entirely off-screen.

This shot has important implications for the ways in which it abstracts the point of view of the camera from those of the characters, while simultaneously depriving the filmic image of its conventional narrative function. Rohdie has described it as the most dramatic manifestation of estrangement and doubling between the fiction and its filmic recording.\(^5\) As he points out, the camera is neither internal nor external to the fiction as it unfolds, in the sense that it is by no means a subjective camera, but neither does it dominate the pro-filmic space in a way that suggests the presentation of a known, pre-arranged factuality. Rather, it assumes an autonomous, independent position that recreates, from a cinematic point of view, the sense of liberty, joy, and escape from meaning that the main character tried to achieve by changing identity.\(^6\)

‘What can you see?’ – Locke previously asked the girl, when she was looking out of the barred window. The slow tracking shot shows us what the reporter might have seen had he really gone to the window, or, to borrow Orr’s phrasing, what ‘he might have encountered if like a bird he could fly out through the window and open out his field of vision to a new level of discovery.’\(^7\) Most of what we see at this stage is seemingly accidental: an old man sitting on a bench, a child who throws stones at a dog, the girl wandering aimlessly through the empty plaza, and the arrival of a car with two agents. We hear indistinct voices, the sound of a trumpet, and what might be a gunshot off-screen. Then other cars arrive. Rachel and two policemen get out and rush into Locke’s room. When asked if she recognises the corpse, Rachel says: ‘I never knew him.’ The girl, conversely, replies: ‘yes.’

\(^5\) Rohdie, pp. 146-154.
\(^6\) Rohdie, p. 148.
Scholarly literature on *The Passenger* has highlighted the dichotomy between the figure of the journalist and that of the arms dealer: while the former is a passive, apolitical investigator who keeps the world at a distance, the latter is a protagonist, someone who can have a true relation with reality.\(^8\) This distinction will turn out to be a focal point for thinking about the dynamics of mediation and contamination in relation to the change of identity (see also subsection 3.2.1). Recently, in an essay published in *Antonioni: Centenary Essays*, Gordon has proposed a reading of *The Passenger* through the filter of genre, and a contextualization of the figure of Locke within the tradition of the journalist in film.\(^9\) Drawing on the narrative and filmic archetypes of the reporter, the soldier, the detective, and the spy, Gordon maintains that Antonioni produces a self-conscious hybridisation of genre mechanisms that is aimed at questioning and destabilising the very foundation of those genres.\(^10\)

As Gordon reminds us, the process of exchange of identities in *The Passenger* underscores a cluster of tropes that are typically present in the journalism movie genre: disguise, makeover, trickery, and role-play. Moreover, the film’s narrative structure is underpinned by patterns of search and enquiry, which find an echo in a number of mediating objects and paraphernalia of journalism – Robertson’s notebook in the first place, but also Locke’s video camera and audio recorder.\(^11\) The reporter’s tapes are marked with the visual and acoustic impressions of his own bodily presence. The mediating role of this material, indeed, manifests itself in the scenes where Rachel scans the archival footage with the purpose of tracing back her husband’s real identity.

In defining *The Passenger* as a ghost story, Gordon aptly suggests that Antonioni’s film reveals a clinical fascination with ghostliness and death, both of which permeate Locke’s afterlife existence on several levels. Firstly, the reporter’s past continuously haunts his present, and secondly, three corpses are displayed at different moments in the film. Yet ghostliness can be said to mark the filmic text also on a deeper level, inasmuch as, to use Gordon’s words, ‘death haunts also those lifeless strips and cans of celluloid hanging in the viewing suite.’\(^12\) The technological traces of Locke remain essentially spectral

\(^8\) See, for instance, Brunette, pp. 138-139, and Orr, ‘Camus and Carné Transformed’.


\(^10\) Gordon, pp. 98-112 (pp. 109-110).

\(^11\) Gordon, pp. 98-112 (pp. 105-107).

\(^12\) Gordon, pp. 98-112 (p. 108).
and uncanny, in that they lead Rachel to nowhere: ‘I never knew him.’ This conforms well with the notion of ghostliness and decomposition as forms of contamination that coexist with our technical and scientific advancements, that is, the filter through which *Blow-Up* and *Speaking Parts* were read in the second part of Chapter Two. As previously demonstrated for these paired films, in fact, one could read all these phenomena of ghostliness as a sort of counterbalance to discourses on rationality and scientific knowledge. The incorporeal is stirred up by the very proliferation of the media, and haunts the characters’ use and abuse of communication technologies. Despite the fact that this constitutes a suitable framework also for *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin*, my intention here is to identify and proceed along distinct but complementary routes of critical analysis. In the meantime, however, let us turn our attention to how the identity shift scenario unfolds in Egoyan’s film.

*Next of Kin* revolves around the character of Peter Foster (Patrick Tierney), a WASP Canadian young man who enjoys ‘pretending’, as he puts it, and seems to lack a clear purpose in life. Out of boredom and frustration with his upper-class milieu, Peter decides to become Bedros, the long-lost son of an Armenian immigrant family, and to adopt their working-class status. The film’s opening sequence consists of a series of low-angle shots taken from the perspective of suitcases circulating on a luggage conveyor. The airport images are intercut with shots of Peter in his parents’ luxury house, and with footage of a videoed therapy session that the family undergoes in a counselling centre. Meanwhile, Peter introduces himself in voice-over. He explicitly acknowledges his split subjectivity as he admits:

> And I figured out a long time ago that being alone was easier if you became two people. One part of you would always be the same, like an audience, and the other part would take on different roles, kind of like an actor.  

In the clinic, Peter comes across the video recorded session of a family from a different ethnic background, the Deryans. Their problems seem to stem from the absence of their eldest son, called Bedros, whom they gave up for adoption when they arrived destitute in Canada. The family’s patriarch takes his anger and frustration out on his daughter Azah (Arsinée Khanjian), who is guilty of

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13 ‘WASP’ is an abbreviation for ‘white Anglo-Saxon Protestant’.
14 Passage transcribed from film.
having fully embraced a Western way of life. With the pretext of a healing journey, Peter moves to a Toronto hotel, from where he impersonates the Deryans’ missing son. Only after the therapist has suggested that he keeps an audio diary, is the voice-over narration revealed as his taped commentary on events. Such a reconfiguration, Romney maintains, has the effect of eroding the authoritative qualities of the film’s narrative voice.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, it significantly contaminates notions of objectivity and subjectivity in film.\textsuperscript{16} Next of Kin here deploys strategies that are very similar to those at work in The Passenger, particularly in terms of how the physical expansion of the boundaries of identity is correlated with the split between body and vocal sound that the tape recorder allows.

It could be argued that this emphasis on the liquid qualities of sound is evocative of the scream that precedes the destruction of the hut in Il deserto rosso, or of the sexual vocalisations leaking from the barriers of censorship in The Adjuster. Earlier in this section, I described how Antonioni’s incorporation of the voice on audiotape produces a substantial slippage in temporality, inducing spectators to think that the recorded conversation between Locke and Robertson corresponds to a real event occurring in the present. Echoing a certain distrust of technology (which was the conduit of my critical analysis in Chapter Two), these parallel scenes from The Passenger and Next of Kin exemplify how the two directors play with our own expectations about film in order to elicit an emotional response. As viewers, we are discomfited, and faced with the awareness that we must distrust any easy interpretation derived from habit.\textsuperscript{17}

It seems that, by recording and then playing back their own voices, Locke and Peter want to inspect their unique voiceprint;\textsuperscript{18} this, I would argue, is

\textsuperscript{15} Romney, p. 30.
\textsuperscript{16} See also Wilson, Atom Egoyan, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{17} In the final part of this thesis, I will return to the sense of impenetrability that permeates the corpus of films analysed in this study. Antonioni and Egoyan in fact share, amongst other things, a certain reputation for being difficult and ‘cold’ filmmakers. These issues will be also addressed in section 3.3, in relation to neorealism and the influence it had on Next of Kin.
\textsuperscript{18} With regard to sound’s quality of uniqueness, R. Murray Schafer writes: ‘Originally all sounds were originals. They occurred at one time in one place only. Sounds were then indissolubly tied to the mechanisms that produced them. The human voice traveled only as far as one could shout. Every sound was uncounterfeitable, unique. Sounds bore resemblances to one another, such as the phonemes which go to make up the repetition of a word, but they were not identical. Tests have shown that it is physically impossible for nature’s most rational and calculating being to reproduce a single phoneme in his own name twice in exactly the same manner.’ R. Murray
indicative of how they are gradually getting outside themselves. Recording technology is thus imbued with a sense of the uncanny, of the familiar (the human voice) made unfamiliar (the recorded, disembodied voice), and difficult to unravel (is it diegetic or non-diegetic? To what extent is it reliable?). The protagonists’ appropriation of a virtual non-self is translated into a fluid, volatile voice on audiotape that spectators cannot, at the beginning, easily identify as such. Whilst its diegetic source remains located in the aseptic, transitional space of Robertson’s and Peter’s hotel rooms, the recorded voice fluctuates in space and time, in a way that reflects the characters’ dissociative moments, and the final discarding of their unwanted skin. The possibility for a voice, originated in one place and at a certain time, to spread and be heard in a completely different context (even post-mortem in Robertson’s case) introduces a regime of substitution and dislocation that affects the texture of both films. In his book *The New Soundscape: A Handbook for the Modern Music Teacher*, R. Murray Schafer coined the term ‘schizophonia’ to describe the effect that our instruments of transmission and storage of sound have on the human psyche.19 Schafer defines schizophonia as ‘the cutting free of sound from its natural origin’, and explains:20

> We have split the sound from the makers of sound. This dissociation I call schizophonia, and if I use a word close in sound to schizophrenia it is because I want very much to suggest to you the same sense of aberration and drama that this word evokes, for the developments of which we are speaking have had profound effects on our lives.21

Returning to *Next of Kin*, the second part focuses entirely on the protagonist’s act of pretence. George and Sonya (Berge and Sirvat Fazlian) welcome their substitute son with open arms, and Peter’s presence as Bedros relieves much of the domestic tension. He successfully mediates the difficult father and daughter relationship by challenging George’s patriarchal and sexist stereotypes about women. Peter’s figure as a beneficial interloper has been compared to that of the guest in Pasolini’s *Teorema* (1968).22 Unlike Pasolini’s

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22 Porton, p. 15. See also Romney, p. 26.
mysterious and seductive visitor, however, Peter does not leave the household and its members.\textsuperscript{23} He settles in his new, racially diverse home, a point that, as Naficy observes, the filmmaker underscores with a last cut to the airport, where Peter finally collects his suitcase from the conveyor.\textsuperscript{24}

The centrality of the theme of performance emphasises the characters’ unstable sense of self, and their need to renegotiate given identities. In one scene, Peter advises Azah that, if she wants to appease her father, she has to tell him what he wants to hear. This implies that she has to regard herself as an actor, where being an actor is not to be confused with being a liar: ‘a liar is someone who doesn’t speak the truth. An actor does, but in somebody else’s voice.’ ‘When you are acting,’ he adds, ‘you’re doing it for someone, you’re providing them with a gift.’\textsuperscript{25} In another sequence, George, who would like to reconcile with his daughter, deceives everyone by feigning a heart attack. After Peter, Azah and Sonya have pretended to steal all the takings from the rug store that he runs, George’s body contorts with chest pain and, weirdly enough, he demands for a Polaroid of the family to be taken.

The surprise birthday party that occurs at the end of the film marks Peter’s complete assimilation into the Deryan family. Surrounded by a crowd of unfamiliar faces, the protagonist gives a speech that advocates a rethinking of social networks of kinship so as to include alternative forms of affiliation and belonging:

\begin{quote}
It’s a pity to be born into a family. If you are raised in a group, you’re obliged to love them, and that really denies you the possibility of getting to know them as people outside of that group. Now in a way, that means that you can never really love your family. And that’s because you’re denied the freedom that’s required to make that sort of commitment – I guess what you’d call the freedom of choice.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

Following the party, Peter lets the Deryans know that he has to leave, claiming that his ‘adoptive’ parents have had a car accident. \textit{Next of Kin} confronts the viewer with many unanswered questions, one of which is whether Azah and her

\textsuperscript{23} The relationship that Pasolini’s guest has with each family member is, of course, erotically charged, and this is not the case for Egoyan’s character. One could note that, from this perspective, there is a closer affinity between the guest in \textit{Teorema} and Noah in \textit{The Adjuster}. In the 1997 interview he gave to \textit{Cineaste}, Egoyan states that he considers Pasolini’s film as having had an important influence on his work. Porton, p. 15.

\textsuperscript{24} Naficy, p. 263.

\textsuperscript{25} Passage transcribed from film.

\textsuperscript{26} Passage transcribed from film.
surrogate brother engage in a romantic relationship. As Wilson comments, Egoyan overtly plays with the incest taboo here, significantly a theme that will return in his later films: ‘[t]he openness of the film and its ending leaves us uncertain of what may happen between them, uncertain of what knowledge and ignorance this will require.’

‘You’ve got them all convinced,’ Peter says to congratulate Azah on acting as the perfect daughter at the party – ‘So do you,’ she replies, perhaps alluding to the fact that she knows they are not really siblings.

The taped diary in voice-over eventually informs us that Peter will never go back to his biological family. In the final shots, we see him at home with Azah. He plays the guitar, while she is inserting photographs in a family album. The reference to family photography evokes a previous scene in which the two ‘siblings’, captured from a low-angle camera position, exchange a silent, complicit look. Azah has just seen some photos of Peter with his ‘adoptive’ parents, and it is easy to suspect that she might have recognised a physical resemblance between him and Mr. Foster (who is played by Patrick Tierney’s actual father, Thomas Tierney).

### 3.2 Nomadism and Homecoming

In this section, I shall propose that Braidotti’s notion of nomadism yields a productive theoretical starting point for addressing key aspects shared by *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin*. I will therefore adopt her conceptualisation of the nomad to delve into practices of mediation and phenomena of contamination in the two films. Such an enquiry will allow me to cover a wide spectrum of issues and concerns which earlier scholarship on the two films has not raised or scrutinised in detail. These include multilingualism and accent, ethnicity, the act of naming, and the role of food. Special emphasis will be placed on the autobiographical parallels in *Next of Kin*, and on the ambivalent scenario that they originate. This is a film that speaks as much to the instability of identity in the modern age, as to opposite realities of assimilation and homecoming.

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28 Passage transcribed from film.
Ultimately, this theoretical pathway will open the way for a reading of *Next of Kin* that critically engages with restrictive definitions of accented or diasporic cinema. As I aim to demonstrate, the use of the term ‘nomad’ in place of ‘exile’ is not devoid of consequences at a methodological level. In subsection 3.2.2, my examination will also implicate Kristeva’s notion of abjection, which I already used in chapters one and two, and Dyer’s study into the representation of whiteness in Western visual culture. This framework will enable me to interpret the characters’ reinvention of identity as a deliberate attempt to escape from the normative, neutral, and unsituated position that they occupy through acts of contamination with an external, non-neutral other.

### 3.2.1 Exiles, Migrants, Nomads, and Polyglots

I shall begin my discussion by drawing attention to a scene of *The Passenger* that seems to crystallise the empowering qualities of the myth of nomadism from an aesthetic point of view. Locke is driving the convertible with the girl away from Barcelona, when she finally asks him what he is running away from. He tells her to turn her back to the front seat. When she does, we see a quickly moving line of trees that seems to have no end. As the girl flaps her arms to imitate a bird in flight, she duplicates Locke’s movement inside the cable car above Barcelona. Brunette observes that these connected moments visually represent the merging identities of the two protagonists. Yet at the same time, he writes, they ‘seem to express an intense, rare sense of utter freedom; significantly, though, each character performs the gesture alone.’

As described in the previous section, the narrative of *The Passenger* eschews temporal continuity through an elaborate montage that reproduces the experience of random thoughts and free associations. In particular, we focused on the sequence leading to the first encounter between Locke and Robertson, and on the temporal dislocation that stems from the split between auditory and visual tracks. Chatman coined the term ‘glideback’, as opposed to ‘flashback’, in order to highlight the smoothness of this transition, and the original effect of a ‘wandering camera’ that moves in an autonomous fashion, through space as

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31 Brunette, p. 137.
well as though time.  

Alison Ross argues that the devices of temporal and spatial discontinuity at work in *The Passenger* have the effect of complicating the logic between and within sequences in a way that brings to the foreground the experience of time of a dispersed identity. The film’s structure, as she notes, consists of a series of episodes that are loosely connected to one another, and that systematically defy any attempt at narrative assimilation. Contrary to conventional patterns of character development, where time is the medium that ensures the construction of a coherent and stable framework, here ‘time is deployed as a space for parading life fragments whose meanings are more or less exhausted in their immediacy.’

The convertible sequence cited above offers a cinematic translation of a life reduced to the present moment. Locke’s journey towards the loss of identity is so rapid that it eludes any form of abstraction or understanding: a continual advance into an unknown dimension that escapes the past in the very moment of its formation. ‘Identity’, as Braidotti writes, ‘is a retrospective notion’. An identity that is progressively dissolving itself, I would suggest, can only experience temporality in terms of a *constant* present. Locke’s past, the baggage of his former life, is apparently gone, while the future consists of a series of unpredictable destinations. *Present* has become the most significant tense.

Ross’s philosophical approach to *The Passenger* has the merit of highlighting the passing of time as an element of dispersion of identity. Several scenes, as she notes, revolve around characters who are either waiting for, or fleeing from, others. The question is, as she suggests, whether ‘a life reduced to the immediate is at all compatible with endowing such a life with meaning.’ Locke’s remarks about our habitual modes of coding experience are pertinent here. Challenging Robertson’s view that places ‘are all the same in the end’, he says, ‘it’s us who remain the same.’ ‘We translate every situation, every experience into the same old codes, we just condition ourselves…’ Locke’s ‘curiosity’ about living another life, as Ross has argued, is presented as ‘a

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34 Ross, pp. 40-51 (p. 49).
36 Ross, pp. 40-51 (p. 50).
37 Passage transcribed from film.
curiosity about the “form” of uncoded experience. By underscoring the importance of temporality in a scenario where the dispersion of identity combines with the evasion of interpretations based on habits, Ross’s reading paves the way for the introduction of my next tool of critical analysis, which is informed by Braidotti’s metaphor — or figuration, as she calls it — of the nomad.

Braidotti describes the nomadic subject as an alternative and politically charged theoretical figuration that is committed to undermining the old modes of thought with regard to human, and especially female, subjectivity. She situates the image of the nomad in a ‘post-modern/industrial/colonial’ context. Nomadism as a myth implies the intersection of multiple axes of differentiation, such as gender, class, and ethnicity. A radically anti-essentialist notion, the nomad allows one ‘to think through and move across established categories and levels of experience: blurring boundaries without burning bridges.’

Braidotti carefully distinguishes the nomad from other images of intercultural otherness, such as the exile and the migrant. She is wary of using the exile as a metaphor because of the grave connotations this term bears: issues like forcible displacement and the right to asylum are too serious to be employed in a figurative sense. Unlike the exile, the migrant goes from one point in space to another for a clear reason, which is economic rather than political. The figure of the nomad, as opposed to those of the exile and the migrant, ‘does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity.’ Drawing on the Deleuzian image of the ‘rhizome’ (the horizontal stem that grows underground and puts out lateral shoots, used by Gilles Deleuze in opposition to the linear roots of trees), Braidotti argues that

38 Ross, pp. 40-51 (p. 46).
39 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, pp. 1-8. Braidotti here invokes the legacy of paradigms and alternative figurations proposed by other feminists, such as Haraway’s cyborg myth. Although it may seem like a contradiction in terms, feminist theory is employed as a framework to discuss the scenarios, rendered by two male auteurs, of two men seeking to contaminate notions of identity. The feminist figurations of the cyborg and the nomad are of interest to the present study for a number of reasons. Generally speaking, in its desire to subvert conventional representations of female subjectivity, feminist critical thought has underscored the relevance of images of contamination, and opened up a discursive space for reflection on the disruption of the idea of purity in a plethora of guises. Albeit questions of gender are not the primary focus of this thesis, I by no means intend to disavow the significance of gender difference within the selected films. Egoyan’s tendency to accentuate the fluid and constructed aspects of gender is in fact acknowledged on several occasions. In the case of the films analysed in this chapter, the role of the girl and that of Azah will be addressed more closely at the end of subsection 3.2.2.
nomadic consciousness is 'about crossing boundaries, about the act of going, regardless of the destination.'

The exile, the migrant and the nomad have different relationships to time. Marked by an acute sense of foreignness, exile literature tends to be anchored to the past and imbued with ideas of separation and absence. The exile mode, for Braidotti, would translate into a tense denoting expected completion, the future perfect. While the past is a lost horizon for the exile, for the migrant it acts as a burden. Migrants are 'caught in an in-between state whereby the narrative of the origin has the effect of destabilizing the present'. The present that the migrants experience is in fact suspended, and closely related to the past: their corresponding tense is the present perfect. Regarding the nomadic mode, Braidotti continues, it would translate into a tense expressing a past action in progress, the imperfect:

][] active, continuous; the nomadic trajectory is controlled speed. The nomadic style is about transitions and passages without predetermined destinations or lost homelands. The nomad's relationship to the earth is one of transitory attachment and cyclical frequentation; the antithesis of the farmer, the nomad gathers, reaps and exchanges but does not exploit.

Besides a narrative of identities in flux, The Passenger and Next of Kin share a symbolic imagery of transitional spaces that is profoundly rooted in an age of globalisation and transnational migration. Both stories are framed within spatial contexts that possess a powerful sense of liminality and porosity; this, I would argue, works to subvert myths of national homogeneity and stability. The characters are constantly on the move, in provisional or mobile places: hotels; airports; vehicles; bars; and restaurants. Naficy provides a comprehensive analysis of these settings in a framework of accented filmmaking, where he suggests that they serve as metaphorical re-workings of transnational subjectivities, and, in many instances, resonate with the emotional legacy of displacement and loss.

The way in which spatiality incorporates and reflects a scenario of boundary transgression further encourages the recourse to anti-essentialist
discourses as a means of addressing neglected trajectories of contamination in the two films. The governing principle of nomadic consciousness, indeed, does not lie in ‘fluidity without borders’; it is to be sought rather in interstitial spaces, and in the ‘acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries’ that stems from these.\footnote{Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 36.} At the same time, nomadism is a useful theoretical tool to explore the significance accorded to mediating strategies by a self that defines itself as contaminated, and that, having lost any sort of alleged purity and fixity, has become infinitely negotiable. It is no coincidence that, as they undermine notions of identity based on coherence and stability, Antonioni and Egoyan bring to the fore the practices of mediation used to present – and pigeonhole – the self in everyday life (for instance, identification cards, acts of naming, photographs, and clothing). These practices revolve around the inextricable link between society and the individual: identity is not an absolute but a perceived fact, something people acquire and develop through their interaction with others. When counterfeiting identity, one accentuates exactly those aspects of the self that hinge on contingency and change (this is particularly evident in Egoyan’s film, where the narrative provides several opportunities for identity plays, parodies and jokes). In highlighting the elements of theatricality and deception that underlie our behavioural norms, *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin* seem to raise one crucial question: is the truth about an individual’s identity ever achievable in an innate and uncontaminated form?

Having said that, the conceptual model that nomadism offers cannot explain all of the implications that identity theft is invested with in the two films. On the one hand, as I detailed above, the nomadic state is a positive myth that suspends homologation and assimilation to hegemonic discourses on inclusion and belonging.\footnote{Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, pp. 15-20.} Nomadic identities are engaged in a continual process of mediation and adaptation to different contexts or situations. Braidotti confirms this when she says that nomadism is not so much about homelessness and displacement as it is about ‘being capable of recreating your home everywhere.’\footnote{Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 16.} On the other hand, however, it would be misleading to think of Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s imagery of travelling identities only in positive terms: fixed self boundaries might well be a burden, but they also provide a protective barrier that impedes the complete dissemination of the self.
Once the illusion of static identities is revealed, it remains to be seen to what extent the disavowal of unity leads to the ecstasy of hovering between multiple selves, or to the agony of living in a state of endemic fragmentation. Leakage between identities poses a threat to the individual’s integrity. Here the obvious reference will be to Nicholson’s character, and to the long take sanctioning his disappearance and death: Locke’s life as a free spirit ends in complete disintegration. I shall return to the assassination sequence in section 3.3. For the moment, it is important to present the reader with a general overview of themes of mediation and contamination in the two films, before considering them from the perspective of nomadism. The confluence of these complementary aspects, indeed, has so far been overlooked. In the process, I will seek to move away from essentialist readings of *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin*, concretising my critique of theories of accented or diasporic cinemas.

Assuming somebody else’s identity destabilises Locke’s and Peter’s clinical, almost documentary approaches to the world: it transforms them from neutral observers, unshaken by what happens around them, into passionate actors. It is interesting to note how, in both films, mediating technologies play a central role in this transfer: in section 3.1, I stressed how useful Schafer’s notion of schizophonia can be to illuminate the dislocation of sound in time and space brought about by the tape recorders. In *Next of Kin*, video serves as a conduit for getting access to somebody else’s personal history. When opportunity presents itself, Peter watches the Deryans’ therapy session on videotape so as to gather all the information he needs, a crucial step necessary to turn him into Bedros. As Timothy Shary puts it, ‘[t]o become a new and powerful participant in this family, all Peter had to do was inject a videotape into a VCR and press “Play”.’\(^{51}\) In the light of this, one could infer that technologies of mediation are similarly implicated in the pathway leading to contamination between identities and, thereby, that both filmmakers establish a link between the technological realm and the reconfiguration of the individual self as a liminal, disordered zone of pollution and abjection.

In the archive of *The Passenger*, film clips are used in a different way, as a means of counteracting the gradual dispersion of Locke’s identity. Rachel and Knight’s research into the reporter’s professional practice is but a vain attempt

\(^{51}\) See also Timothy Shary, ‘Video as Accessible Artifact and Artificial Access: The Early Films of Atom Egoyan’, *Film Criticism*, 19.3 (Spring 1995), 2-29 (p. 7).
to assemble the scattered fragments of his past existence. In *Next of Kin*, video is indirectly called upon to mediate familial conflicts, an aspect that Shary’s critique explores in detail.\(^{52}\) Egoyan’s film was partly shot in a real counselling centre that made use of video technology for clinical purposes. Family members were videotaped as they talked, and these recordings were then analysed. Whether this practice was due to the belief that video could provide truthful insights into someone’s feelings, or to the fact that people tend to behave differently in front of a camera, the effect of its inclusion is to raise questions about the medicalization of image technologies. This could be seen as an anticipation of the distorted uses of the image figuring in *Speaking Parts*. Organ transplantation, indeed, takes on a similar function as counselling in *Next of Kin*: both surgeon’s and therapist’s healing practices of mediation entail side effects of intrusion and contamination spreading. While Chapter Two interpreted the transgression of the boundaries of the body as abject, thereby focusing in particular on the visceral aspects of the Kristevan concept, Chapter Three will explore this in relation to subjectivity. It is interesting to note that Peter’s method – role-play – is not so different from that of the counsellor, and paradoxically, it has the same aim of solving the Deryans’ problems. As the protagonist says, the role of the distanced therapist is an enviable one, because (and here the reference to filmmaking as a form of mediation is quite explicit) he or she gets ‘to know another family, giving direction to people’s lives.’\(^{53}\) I will return to the range of resonances surrounding Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s incorporation of image technologies in section 3.3, where the status of diegetic and non-diegetic cameras will be compared and contrasted in relation to the construction of space.

A further aspect of *Next of Kin* that lends itself well to a reading in terms of mediation and contamination concerns the lack of engagement with reality that Peter shows in his existence as a WASP young man. His attitude is very reminiscent of Locke’s in *The Passenger*: opposites attract in this case, and the reporter’s professional impartiality as an Anglophone foreign correspondent gives way to the fatal political commitment of his second life. Arms dealing forces Locke to relinquish his objective stance on the end of colonial power, and to become entangled in the same historical contradictions that he previously

\(^{52}\) Shary, pp. 4-10.

\(^{53}\) Passage transcribed from film.
refused to acknowledge. With regard to this, Brunette writes that ‘[b]eyond this rather conventional critique of journalism’s illusory “objectivity”, Antonioni is mounting a broader investigation of the nature of the image and its relation to reality.’ With Brunette’s comment in mind, I propose that one crucial question has to be what one decides to include or exclude in the act of watching: how far are the two protagonists willing to let themselves be affected – contaminated – by what they see? To what extent do they look at things the way a passive observer, or a distracted passenger would? Concerning this, I fully accept what Cuccu says about the auteur’s self-reflexive presence, which in The Passenger manifests itself:

\[\text{[N]on come messa a nudo delle strutture, come esibizione scoperta del dispositivo e delle sue articolazioni, ma in una maniera meno eclatante, meno ‘diretta’ e tuttavia, forse, più profonda. Ciò che è in gioco non è, voglio dire, il meccanismo dello sguardo, ma il suo ‘valore’, la sua ‘significanza’, la sua capacità di avere un rapporto con qualche cosa che la ‘mente’ dell’autore sintetizza nel termine di ‘realità’.}\]

Before I continue, I wish to clarify my terminology further. As I pointed out in the Introduction, contamination as a metaphor has negative overtones; in Chapter One and Chapter Two, I employed it to navigate through themes of waste, sadistic pornography, dissolution of bodily boundaries, and ghostliness. Nevertheless, I also made clear that this imagery, that of destabilising, uncontrolled spreading, does not necessarily have a negative connotation in my work. This is particularly true for the present chapter. Not unlike Haraway’s cyborg myth, nomadism as a theoretical model valorises peripheral, interstitial spaces, the sites in-between traditional dichotomies. By undoing the alleged security of fixed identities, the figuration of the nomad formulates the self’s capacity for multiple mediations and interconnections with a number of external agents and forces, thereby ascribing an empowering value to the dynamic, non-unitary facets of subjectivity. Against this backdrop, the various manifestations

\[54\text{Brunette, p. 139.}\]
\[55\text{Lorenzo Cuccu, Antonioni: Il discorso dello sguardo e altri saggi (Pisa: ETS, 1997), p. 103. ‘[N]ot as a display of the structures, or as an exhibition of the apparatus and its articulations, but in a less evident manner, less “direct”, and yet, perhaps, deeper. What is at stake is not the mechanism of the gaze, but rather its “value”, its “significance”, its ability to have a relationship with something that the “mind” of the author synthesises in the term “reality”.’}\]
of hybridity and contamination figuring in *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin* will be revisited in a more positive light.

Inspired by people who live a nomadic lifestyle, Braidotti’s notion of nomadism corresponds to a kind of critical consciousness that resists literal figurations. The nomadic state is conceived as a form of empowerment that opens up new possibilities for thought and behaviour, particularly for feminists. As a polyglot, Braidotti stresses the importance of occupying a position between languages, of being, to use her words, a ‘linguistic nomad’, and ‘a specialist of the treacherous nature of language’.\(^{56}\) As she explains:

> The polyglot as a nomad in between languages banks on the affective level as his/her resting point; s/he knows how to trust traces and to resist settling into one, sovereign vision of identity. The nomad’s identity is a map of where s/he has already been; s/he can always reconstruct it a posteriori, as a set of steps in an itinerary. But there is no triumphant *cogito* supervising the contingency of the self; the nomad stands for movable diversity, the nomad’s identity is an inventory of traces.\(^ {57}\)

Polyglots provide a powerful counter-image to hegemonic visions of identity because they are intimately aware of the forms of conceptualisation underlying language as a medium: their condition gives them a privileged insight into the arbitrary relationship between linguistic signs and signified objects.\(^ {58}\) With this concept in mind, let us turn back to *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin*, and especially to how they challenge practices of linguistic mediation and representation through repeated oscillations between mother tongue and foreign language.

It goes without saying that languages are relevant to discourses on identity, both in terms of groups and individuals. Traditionally associated with an idea of nation state, their use (or non-use) can reflect feelings of closeness or distance. Here I contend that *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin* could be productively read as polyglot films: the incorporation of different languages, untranslated and unstilted, is arguably a strategy that both Antonioni and Egoyan employ with the effect of increasing scepticism about the steady nature of sign systems. *The Passenger* includes brief dialogues in Spanish and French, while the wedding sequence in Munich is shot entirely in German. The


fact that Locke does not understand the words of the ceremony is indicative of his own failed marriage with Rachel (the reason for this failure is never made explicit: their union, it seems, has been reduced to an empty, institutional practice). Hinting at the importance of language issues in *The Passenger*, Orr points out that 'not only are the voices foreign, but also the culture’s visual signs.'[^59] The reference here is to the film’s early sequences, in which Locke unsuccessfully tries to use sign language to communicate with local people. The centrality of processes of signification is emphasised also by Brunette, for whom 'the film concerns the ongoing question of the interpretation of signs, the fact that the world is not simply given, but must be interpreted.'[^60]

At this point in the discussion we are reminded of a scene from *Next of Kin*, the one in which two therapists smoke their cigarettes in front of the ‘no smoking’ sign inside the lift. Egoyan accentuates processes of codification also as he plays with his actor’s accented speech, or includes insistent background chatting in Armenian (for example, during the party sequence). I would suggest that all these incorporations of foreignness have the effect of staining the filmic text with an opaque and indelible mark. Interestingly enough, both directors deliberately abstain from neutralising these stains through translation procedures: the result is a Babel of voices that does not enhance but overshadows communication by engendering a sense of dirt, chaos, linguistic hybridity, and promiscuity.

All this goes to show the significance of nomadism as an anti-essentialist theoretical framework for understanding the ways in which *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin* celebrate the contamination between notions of identity at various levels. In light of Braidotti’s figuration of the nomad, the polyglot qualities that these two films deploy do not appear to reassert cultural gaps, nor to reinforce binary oppositions between self and other, but instead to convey a sense of impurity and liminality. This serves to remind us of the emergence of a hybrid dimension that can no longer be traced back to its supposedly ‘authentic’ roots. Section 3.3 will return to the same concepts through the lens of spatiality, particularly with regard to Egoyan’s choice of Kensington Market as a location that does not allow for essentialist opposite polarities. The use of multilingualism, therefore, does not work to accentuate the fractures between

[^59]: Orr, ‘Camus and Carné transformed’.
[^60]: Brunette, p. 140.
different categories of identity, but rather to exhibit the elements of fluidity and arbitrariness that underlie those very categories. For the directors, our identities are never essential or innate, but are always a social construct that requires the performance of a narrative about who we are and how we fit into a particular group.

Egoyan’s later work would further develop concepts of translation and subtitles as metaphors for filmic mediation. In the introduction to the book *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film*, which Egoyan co-edited with scholar Ian Balfour, the editors write: ‘[e]very film is a foreign film, foreign to some audience somewhere – and not simply in terms of language.’

Taking subtitles as a point of departure, these collected essays engage a wide range of ideas as to what constitutes otherness and translation in film culture. Every film is a foreign film, indeed, insofar as it is an open door to another subject’s world. Watching a film, even in one’s mother tongue, means experiencing the mediation of a radical alterity, for the screen is the interface that provides direct access to someone else’s gaze. There are, of course, other films by Egoyan that can be approached as polyglot more aptly than *Next of Kin. The Adjuster, Family Viewing* and, most notably, *Calendar* leave entire segments of dialogue in languages other than English untranslated and unsubtitled. As Adriana Serban maintains, the phenomenon of multilingualism in film often functions as an attempt to bring to the fore mediation practices. Calling attention to Egoyan’s refusal to translate foreign languages when they appear on screen, Tschofen argues that the director thus ‘reproduces in the viewer who does not understand them a sensation of alienation and disorientation that mimics the experience of his exiles onscreen.’

Naficy considers the use of actors who speak with an accent in their pronunciation to be an essential component of exilic and diasporic filmmaking. He proposes the accent as an indicator of this cinema’s marginality and interstitiality, which he mainly defines in opposition to Hollywood and its dominant modes of production. ‘Accent’, Naficy writes, ‘is one of the most intimate and powerful markers of group identity and solidarity, as well as

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of individual difference and personality. His accented model establishes a parallel between the standardised accent of mainstream national television and the classical and new Hollywood films:

Applied to cinema, the standard, neutral, value-free accent maps onto the dominant cinema produced by the society’s reigning mode of production. This typifies the classical and the new Hollywood cinemas, whose films are realistic and intended for entertainment only, and thus free from overt ideology or accent. By that definition, all alternative cinemas are accented, but each is accented in certain specific ways that distinguish it.

For Naficy, the accented voice permeates the filmic text on different levels – its visual style, narrative, themes, and production modes. It could be said that the notion of Hollywood cinema as free from accent and ideological discourses – in the sense of a way of seeing the world that serves specific social interests – is, in itself, a debatable point. Interrogating the validity of Naficy’s accented model, and the very notion of ‘accent’, Lim proposes that we should ‘provincialize Hollywood’: ‘instead of being assumed as having no accent, Hollywood must be reconceptualized as bearing an accent that has been, for historical reasons, dominant to an extent that it passes as universal (read unaccented), in many parts of the world.’ What I aim to question in this chapter, however, is the degree to which Egoyan’s early films can be productively viewed through the lens of his post-exilic condition. There is, perhaps, an underlying structural and aesthetic determinism in Naficy’s reading, which does not account for other important features of Egoyan’s work, nor does it fully consider the WASP Canadian element in the director’s cultural upbringing (see also the extract from the interview he gave to José Arroyo, quoted in 3.2.2). Whilst recognising the impact exerted by the diasporic experience on Egoyan’s cinematic vision, I contend that focusing only on this aspect presents the risk of embracing a form of essentialism. Revisiting Next of Kin can help shed light on the drawbacks of Naficy’s assertions, and on how his approach to the transnational must be challenged and reappraised.

64 Naficy, p. 23.
65 Naficy, p. 23.
66 Lim, pp. 129-144 (p. 141; p. 130).
I will proceed by juxtaposing the theme of identity transgression in *Next of Kin* with some biographical elements in the life of its director. This will enable me to show that the trauma of displacement represents only one potential way to look at Egoyan’s first feature film, and more importantly, that *Next of Kin* deconstructs idealised notions of family and imagined homeland as spaces of purity and stability. The quest for an original, uncontaminated home is just as elusive as the idea of an authentic self. By calling attention to the possible pitfalls of adopting an accented critical framework for Egoyan’s oeuvre, I also intend to highlight the ways in which the director’s first feature film postulates the need to reconsider our structures of belonging according to a late-modern, increasingly globalised milieu. The escape from identity, from one perspective, amounts to an escape from a national home. For this reason, my approach equally implies moving beyond a strictly national frame. As explained in the Introduction, the critical discourse that underpins my research questions is one of transnationalism in film studies.

In an interview with CBC Television, Egoyan clearly states that Peter’s situation functions almost as an allegory of his own upbringing. In the early 1960s, with the rise of Nasserist nationalism, Egoyan’s parents moved from Egypt to Victoria, British Columbia, where they set up a furniture store. Unlike cities like Montreal or Toronto, Victoria had a small Armenian community at that time, and the Egoyan family was consequently isolated. While attending English private schools, the young Egoyan learnt how to sublimate his Armenian background into the dominant WASP Canadian culture. According to Naficy, the filmmaker gave up his first language ‘when he entered kindergarten to forestall ethnic embarrassment and harassment’. Egoyan found himself being socially excluded and labelled as the ‘little Arab’ at school, hence his initial refusal to accept Armenian as a cultural background.

Things changed, however, when the director moved to the University of Toronto to study international relations. During these years, he got involved in Armenian nationalist activities through student associations, and, as a result, he

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69 Naficy, p. 36.
70 Naficy, p. 284.
developed more of an interest in his own nationality.\textsuperscript{71} Egoyan attributes this shift in perspective also to his first encounter with his future wife, Khanjian, which occurred in 1984.\textsuperscript{72} Born in Beirut and raised in a large diasporic community, Khanjian had a clearer and less abstract idea of what it meant to be Armenian, based on concrete experiences of the community’s traditions and customs.\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Next of Kin} was shot when the filmmaker was twenty-four years old, exactly the same age as Peter.\textsuperscript{74} For Egoyan, the protagonist’s story is one of ‘rediscovery and re-entry’: it is then interesting to note that the director himself was going through a very similar process at the early stages of his career.\textsuperscript{75}

Naficy defines Egoyan’s filmography as one of ‘increased ethnicization’, a stylistic trend that emerged with his earliest works and reached its pinnacle with \textit{Calendar} in 1993.\textsuperscript{76} With the exception of \textit{Ararat}, however, the theme of Armenian identity is virtually eradicated from the films of the post-\textit{Exotica} period. According to Naficy, ‘[t]he trajectory of ethnicization in Egoyan’s films can be read as a reflection and a refraction of the dynamism of ethnicity and nationalism and of Egoyan’s own increasing awareness of his tripartite identity as Egyptian, Canadian, and Armenian.’\textsuperscript{77} By framing Egoyan’s cinema within a context of accented filmmaking, Naficy’s scholarship emphasises the auteur’s post-exilic identity, locating him on the margins of film production in both stylistic and economic terms, and thereby failing to see his relationship with both mainstream and art-house cinematic practices (see the Conclusion). The deep structure of Egoyan’s films – their plots, themes, characters, and formal vocabulary – is revisited in terms of an aesthetic response to the difficulties of displacement, memory, and loss.\textsuperscript{78} Naficy traces the genealogy of accented filmmaking back to a tradition of ‘Third Cinema’, a movement that arose in Latin-America which adopted a polemical stance against mainstream/capitalist and authorial cinemas. Like their more radical Third Cinema counterparts, accented

\textsuperscript{71} Naficy, p. 285. During the late 1970s, some extremist organisations turned to a violent campaign of terrorist attacks as part of their fight for the recognition of the genocide perpetrated against the Armenians by the Ottoman government in the early 1900s.


\textsuperscript{73} Egoyan, ‘An Essay on Calendar’, pp. 93-97 (p. 94).

\textsuperscript{74} The fact that Egoyan chose his double on screen to be an Anglo-Saxon young man is nonetheless relevant, and will be discussed in 3.2.2.

\textsuperscript{75} Egoyan, ‘Atom Egoyan’s \textit{Next of Kin}’, in CBC Digital Archives.

\textsuperscript{76} Naficy, p. 37.

\textsuperscript{77} Naficy, pp. 283-284.

\textsuperscript{78} Naficy, p. 23.
films are described as ‘historically conscious, politically engaged, critically aware, generically hybridized, and artisanally produced’.\textsuperscript{79} Naficy then identifies a series of factors that he considers to be indicators of a director’s accented style. Among these are: the presence of ethnic characters and actors; chronicles of home-seeking journeys and border crossings; the concern with identity and camouflage of identity; multilingual and fragmented narratives which often unfold in epistolary forms (via telephone, letters, or video recordings); haptic experiences, cinematic evocations of touch, and tactile forms of engagement with the audiovisual media.\textsuperscript{80} More recently, Wilson has argued that Egoyan’s filmic discourse can be better understood by expanding this kind of approach: ‘I too argue that Egoyan’s films are frequently about Armenia, memory, and ethnic identity but that these issues are interwoven with his other concerns, particularly fantasy, displacement, and loss.’\textsuperscript{81} In the light of this, let us move on and discuss the links between the pair of films analysed in this chapter through an anti-essentialist lens.

It can be maintained that the main difference between Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s critiques of stable and unitary identities is that, only for the protagonist of \textit{The Passenger}, escape from historicity and temporality becomes an end in itself. The various faded, deserted landscapes and hotel rooms that Locke encounters along his journey are but blank screens onto which he projects his adopted self, in the relentless, yet futile, pursuit of freedom from himself. Peter’s choice is apparently more contradictory: eventually, he decides to stay with the Deryans, and seems to be much happier there than with his biological parents. He is, above all, a home-seeking character, and his process of becoming ‘other’, as I explained above, reflects the filmmaker’s personal transition away from assimilationist tendencies, and towards an increased ethnic awareness. At the same time, however, it is important to note how closely the homecoming theme is intertwined with the consciousness that any home constitutes more of an artificial construct than a biological and immutable fact. To put it in another way, it seems clear that there is no longer any such thing as exclusive and fully reassuring belonging.

If Peter’s transgression of identity is not devoid of structures of involvement and affiliation, the focal point exists in the impermanence of these

\textsuperscript{79} Naficy, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{80} Naficy, pp. 22-39.
\textsuperscript{81} Wilson, \textit{Atom Egoyan}, pp. 3-4.
structures, and in how they imply the decline of fixed, linear, and unitary visions of human subjectivity. Braidotti writes:

Being a nomad, living in transition, does not mean that one cannot or is unwilling to create those necessarily stable and reassuring bases for identity that allow one to function in a community. Rather, nomadic consciousness consists in not taking any kind of identity as permanent. The nomad is only passing through; s/he makes those necessarily situated connections that can help her/him to survive, but s/he never takes on fully the limits of one national, fixed identity. The nomad has no passport – or has too many of them.\(^\text{82}\)

In *Next of Kin*, biology counts for little, or nothing. The anxieties surrounding non-biological parenthood and transnational adoption find clear resonance in Peter’s story, and are particularly indicative of the issues in question: is there a place where an adopted child naturally belongs? Or, is the adoptee a freestanding subject, only connected to his new name, his new home, and his new nation state?\(^\text{83}\) We are reminded of how, perhaps in an unprecedented way, citizenship has become a totally flexible, interim practice based on the disconnection of nationality from ethnic or cultural origin. With its emphasis on the limitations of static identities, the model of nomadic citizenship is one that cultivates ideas of transnationalism and multiple belongings;\(^\text{84}\) for this reason, it provides the potential to challenge the privileged site of the national frame in film studies:

The crucial thing about nomadic subject is that it is post-identitarian: nomadic is a verb, a process by which we map out multiple transformations and multiple ways of belonging, each depending on where our particular location is and how we grow. So we have to map out the alternative cartographies of the non-unitary subjects that we are, so that we can get rid of any idea that there are subjects that are completely unitary, belonging entirely to one location.\(^\text{85}\)

It is interesting to note that it is not just Bedros, the absent child, who is perfectly transferable to a different home and family context. The dialogue that

\(^{82}\) Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 33.

\(^{83}\) For a sociological discussion of transnational adoption practices, see Barbara Yngvesson, ‘Going “Home”: Adoption, Loss of Bearings, and the Mythology of Roots’, *Social Text*, 74, 21.1 (Spring 2003), 7-27 (pp. 7-10).


\(^{85}\) Braidotti, ‘On Nomadism’.
Peter overhears between two therapists in the lift is emblematical. Contrary to what we are initially led to think, the couple is not talking about their actual families, but about their patients’ ones:

Man: So how is your family?
Woman: Not bad. And yours?
Man: So and so, you know.
Woman: How is your mother coming along?
Man: She’s better.
Woman: And your wife?
Man: She told me she spent the weekend with another man.
Woman: You’re joking.
Man: Then tried to commit suicide.
Woman: [pause] How about your husband?
Man: Oh, he’s great. Very cooperative, very open about his feelings, you know.
Woman: Oh, that’s a start. I have to show you my family sometime.
Man: You have much tape of them?
Woman: Six hours.
Man: Colour?
Woman: Black and white, but I shot it in room 304.
Man: So you’re happy with it?
Woman: Oh, the lighting is as even as you can get it.\textsuperscript{86}

Eventually, we discover that the real concern of the therapists is the footage, as if having access to high-quality technological products could grant them evidence of greater truths about human behaviour. Shary observes that, in both \textit{Next of Kin} and \textit{Family Viewing}, spectators witness ‘how video cameras induce people to behave differently and reveal parts of themselves which only a live camera can capture’; yet, paradoxically, ‘Egoyan seems to constantly expose greater mysteries behind the camera and beyond the recording.’\textsuperscript{87} As happens in \textit{The Passenger}, the trope of the identity shift is closely combined with an interest in what it means to report the real. I will return to this point in section 3.3, where questions surrounding the inscription of photographs and diegetic monitors will be examined in more detail.

Adopting Braidotti’s anti-essentialist paradigm means acknowledging that, in \textit{Next of Kin}, Egoyan displaces fixed modes of differentiation, eroding the essence of both Canadianness and Armenianness. The arguments that see in his cinema the locus of a national or diasporic perspective, I suggest, are challenged by the fact that his aesthetic strategies reveal the arbitrariness of

\textsuperscript{86} Passage transcribed from film.
\textsuperscript{87} Shary, p. 3.
these categories, unsettling the very assumptions on which such models of film criticism are based. In staging the contamination of notions of identity, *Next of Kin* makes ethnicity utterly interchangeable, just like an item of clothing, or a transplanted organ. This position is supported by the analysis of Stolar, according to whom the performance of ethnicity in *Next of Kin* serves precisely to reveal that ethnicity itself is entirely negotiable – that it can be learnt, transgressed, and counterfeited.\(^88\) Similarly, Wilson writes that the film reminds us ‘of the element of estrangement and playacting inherent in the adoption or enactment of any identity’.\(^89\) The painting of an empty sweater in Azah’s room seems to suggest precisely this. Our ethnic and cultural origins do not express any interior identity. On the contrary, they have become more erasable than ever – something we wear, take off, and dispose of, completely at our whim.

This performativity is exhibited in the sequence where Sonya holds her new-found son on the kitchen table, cuddling him like a baby. In the background, George’s dwarfed figure is excluded from the awkward scene of mother-child symbiosis that takes shape in the foreground. When the protagonist, filmed from a table-level angle, turns his green eyes to the camera, his WASP-looking physical appearance could not be more evident. With this gesture, not only does Peter implicate us, as viewers, in his act of pretence – he also unveils the credulity of the Deryans, the fact that, to use Romney’s words, they ‘see the son they want to see, a point that would have been weakened if Egoyan had cast an actor who could more plausibly pass as Armenian.’\(^90\) Likewise, the filmmaker’s deliberate use of negative racial stereotypes, whose apparent effect is to essentialise our idea of Armenianness, can be seen as questioning the politics of cultural authenticity, and thereby as hinting at the possibility that the concept of purity with regard to our multiple identities is disrupted already.

Here it could be argued that Egoyan’s critique applies not only to race and ethnicity, but also to issues of gender. The Deryans look like the perfect embodiment of caricatural images about the Armenians. George is an aggressive patriarch who owns a rug store – and, as Naficy reminds us, the rug-

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\(^{89}\) Wilson, *Atom Egoyan*, p. 16.

\(^{90}\) Romney, p. 32.
merchant is the principal derogatory stereotype for Armenians in Canada.\textsuperscript{91} Sonya is the personification of the submissive and compliant wife, who savagely buys live rabbits to kill and cook for dinner, while Azah’s uncle is reported saying that her ‘thighs are ripe for babies’.\textsuperscript{92} Besides, the \textit{mise-en-scène} of the Deryans’ house abounds with signifiers of Armenian identity: decorative objects, carpets, and diegetic folk music.\textsuperscript{93} While staging a therapeutic role-play session, it is the counsellor who presents us with an over-performance of racial prejudice against the Armenians: ‘do you think that I’ll find you ignorant? That I’ll be embarrassed by your accent? Well, I am. You’re just a lousy foreigner, a lousy peasant. No wonder people don’t trust you, you smell.’\textsuperscript{94}

The self-conscious adoption of crude forms of stereotype is thus one of the strategies that allows Egoyan to destabilise the boundaries of identity categories, and to suggest that, perhaps, the quest for authenticity is a pointless one. We are never explicitly told that the Deryans are Armenian, yet they adhere so well to clichéd images that their ethnicity seems like the rehearsal of a pre-written script. Are viewers to believe that they are authentically ethnic only because of their attachment to (or enactment of) traditional cultural practices? Rather, such ostentatious forms of stereotype are as fictional and performative as Peter’s claimed kinship, and they ultimately underpin the narrative’s overall de-essentialisation of identity concepts.\textsuperscript{95}

Last, but not least, it is important to remember that \textit{Next of Kin} never clearly reveals whether or not Azah and the Deryans know that Peter is an impostor. Naficy places particular emphasis on the ethical issues surrounding Peter’s masquerade, arguing that it has the potential for ‘unethical manipulation of innocent people’.\textsuperscript{96} However, one could infer that the Deryans, and particularly Azah, are tacit accomplices in Peter’s deception, which eventually

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{91} Naficy, p. 284.
  \item \textsuperscript{92} Passage transcribed from film.
  \item \textsuperscript{93} Romney, p. 32.
  \item \textsuperscript{94} Passage transcribed from film.
  \item \textsuperscript{95} Talking about the combination of rootlessness and ethnicity that typically characterises his characters, Egoyan states: ‘[T]he thing is that I’m very careful not to label them as being Armenian or Egyptian or... You see, one of the advantages of working with the Armenian language or the Armenian culture is that it is, for most people, not something that can be easily identified, and that allows me the luxury of being able to treat it almost on a metaphorical level. I’m not particularly interested in giving details or being precise about a particular state of national alienation. Rather I’m interested in how I can use that as a metaphor for a certain attitude or a certain perception of existence. Anytime that it becomes a specific issue I tend to shy away from it because it’s not really what I feel comfortable doing.’ José Arroyo, ‘The Alienated Affections of Atom Egoyan’, \textit{Cinema Canada}, 145 (1987), 14-19 (p. 17).
  \item \textsuperscript{96} Naficy, p. 264.
\end{itemize}
turns out to be more therapeutic than counselling for the restoration of the family’s unity. Wilson, for instance, writes that ‘[t]here are points in the film when it appears that all the Deryans know they are being duped; this possibility increases our sense of the complexity of their motivation and their collaboration in a collective act of disavowal’ (a description of these episodes can be found at the end of section 3.1).97 One could also argue, however, that a certain involvement in structures of insincerity and manipulation is the subtext of George’s playful and bitterly ironic attitude. What is interesting here is that, seen in this light, the Deryans’ behaviour is surprisingly similar to Peter’s, for the ways in which it articulates a conscious or unconscious desire for contamination by the non-self. What I mean by the term ‘desire’ will be made clearer in the next subsection, where I will read Locke’s and Peter’s contamination acts in terms of a voluntary disavowal of normativity, paying particular attention to how, in Next of Kin, such an impulse is haptically suggested and enhanced through the imagery of food.

3.2.2 The Desire for Contamination

With their emphasis on performativity and stealing, the films presented in this chapter provide insights into the intentionality that can underlie contamination processes. The anti-essentialist framework of nomadism enabled me to argue against views that place Egoyan within a context of accented cinema in terms of his style and production modes. The director’s Armenian background definitely plays an influential role in the films of the pre-Exotica period, or in Ararat; however, in labelling his directorial practice as accented, one runs the risk of seeing it merely as part of a counter-current to mainstream and authorial cinemas, overlooking the important connections between them (see also the Conclusion). In this subsection, I will expand on the consequences of such a statement, thus paving the way for a similar repositioning of Antonioni’s oeuvre and its legacy beyond or outside the specific context of Italian film culture. At the same time, I will try to illuminate other important aspects that the two films share, and most notably, what I will call the desire for contamination. There lies, as I shall argue, the motivational force for the characters’ identity shift and,

97 Wilson, Atom Egoyan, p. 20.
implicitly, for their relinquishment of the ultimate position of privilege and power as humanity’s most ordinary and non-specific representatives.

In 3.2.1, I briefly mentioned the significance accorded to acts of naming and classification in both *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin*; it is my intention here to discuss these as strategies of mediation, in a similar way as proposed for *The Adjuster* in Chapter One. ‘Locke’ as a name evokes a caged, imprisoned spirit; likewise, the etymological meaning of ‘Peter’/’Bedros’ – from *petra*: ‘stone’, ‘rock’ – conjures up images of fixity. Interestingly enough, both films include a shot in which the wandering figure of the protagonist is superimposed on the image of an animal cage. In the market streets of the Ramblas, Locke has to walk beyond a stall selling caged birds so as to hide from Knight (a prelude, perhaps, to the film’s final cage, the barred window at the Hotel de la Gloria) (figure 3.b). In the streets of Kensington Market, Peter’s face is framed across another cage: that of the live rabbits offered for sale (figure 3.c). These moments crystallise all the futility of the characters’ pursuit of freedom, their being locked in this new name they have chosen – for standing in the background of the cage is the same, at least visually, as being inside it.

As Brunette notes, Robertson’s corpse is ‘the exact opposite of the almost evanescent one in *Blow-Up*, since it is more present, more viscerally real’, and ‘occupies an unconventionally large amount of time’. ⁹⁸ There are no corpses in *Next of Kin*, but the camera tends to enhance Peter’s bodily presence; this is visible, for instance, in the low angle shot in which he is being cuddled on the kitchen table, described by Wilson in terms of ‘massive bodily presence, materiality, near monstrosity’. ⁹⁹ As this haptic moment unfolds, we are reminded of the body exchange in *The Passenger*, for the ways in which it encourages spectators to experience the heaviness of Robertson’s cadaver through a visual evocation of tactility. As already suggested for *The Passenger* in 3.1, however, the films’ triggering of sensory memories is counterbalanced by a vividly incorporeal scenario, which mainly unfolds through the haunting qualities of the media. Furthermore, despite the fact that the physical presence of the body or corpse is heightened, one might note that there remains one specific part of it that is still marked by transiency and evanescence – the face.

⁹⁸ Brunette, p. 129.
The human face is a signifying entity, a locus of identification and categorisation. We are used to evaluating the many faces that pass before us, gridding the subjects so as to impose some order on the surrounding reality. Acts of naming function like cages in The Passenger and Next of Kin, and the face is instrumental in enforcing this system of surveillance and representation. This explains why, at a certain point in the identity shift, the faces of the protagonists are negated to the viewer: when Robertson’s lifeless body is first shown, it is face down on his bed. Similarly, the face of Locke is no longer visible after he dies; and so is Peter’s at the moment in which the birthday cake is suddenly thrown at him (this is also the only time in the film when he looks truly disconcerted, perhaps even angry at his foster family). The hiding of the face is charged with a highly symbolic value: it entails a repudiation of inheritance, and a voluntary appropriation of the notions of alterity and difference. The convergence between motifs of face and naming clearly manifests itself in the directors’ maniacal attention to details involving identification cards and passport photos. Brunette confirms this as he comments that ‘the passport is the largely artificial, if bureaucratically efficient way in which governments unsuccessfully attempt to name and fix human identity.’ Indeed, Antonioni’s camera lingers on Locke as he doctors the two documents, and in a later scene, on Rachel as she notices Robertson’s pasted photo on her husband’s passport. The girl, who plays an essential role in nurturing the process of contamination between identities, is emblematically nameless.

Let us take a step back now to introduce a related theme that is developed only in Egoyan’s film, but that speaks to the core of the questions I want to address in this subsection. One often critically neglected aspect of Next of Kin revolves around the imagery of food, whose characteristics portray in microcosm a certain desire for (and necessity of) contamination by the non-self; this, as I shall argue, underpins the transgression of the boundaries of identity in both films. Egoyan develops the trope of food as a marker of culture and belonging to the ethnic community. Here I want to call attention to two specific episodes that revolve around eating processes: the first, just mentioned above, occurs at the end of the film, when Peter receives his second birthday cake.

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100 Brunette, p. 130.
101 Food plays a significant role also in later films such as Ararat and, most notably, Felicia’s Journey (1999).
After Azah has invited him to take a closer look, George’s hands emerge out of the cake, grab Peter’s face and pull it into the white cream. The father then proudly points at the motto printed on Peter’s T-shirt, announcing: ‘Deryan and Son’. The second episode relates to the two family meals, each of which can be said to denote a progressive stage in the protagonist’s journey of homecoming. Peter is first welcomed in the Deryans’ home with a traditional lunch, which is then duplicated by the five-minute family scene around the table. Shot with a handheld camera, this sequence displays a typical Armenian family gathering (the actors are, indeed, real members of the Armenian community in Toronto, and among them is Egoyan himself).

Cakes represent a powerful narrative and visual motif in *Next of Kin*. One scene shows Sonya, who works as a domestic worker, as she prepares a cake identical to the one that Peter eats during the first birthday party with his biological parents. These connected moments offer a reminder of the social gap between the Fosters and the Deryans. Calling attention to the second birthday party, Wilson describes the gag of the birthday cake as ‘an odd initiation ritual of staining and naming’, through which George acknowledges Peter/Bedros as his own son. The cream staining the protagonist’s face, I would suggest, is the physical residue marking a narrative moment of extreme contamination, the crossing of the ultimate boundary between self and other. The detail of the slogan on Peter’s T-shirt – ‘Deryan and Son’ – leads us back to the theme of naming, and to the matrix of codification and control that it denotes. Acts of naming, as we have seen earlier in this subsection, work in favour of the institutionalisation of one single system of signification; for this reason, they go totally against the spirit of the nomad as polyglot, as well as against the desire for contamination that eating so profoundly exemplifies. Similarly to what emerged from the analysis carried out in Chapter One (in particular with regard to *The Adjuster*), one could argue that there exists a certain tension between the fixed classification systems (names, documents, and identification photos) that mediate our relationship with the real, and a scenario of collapsed borders which puts an abrupt end to this series of signifying chains. Every time that a face is denied to the viewer, differentiation is no longer possible: an opaque zone of indiscernibility begins.

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Thus, whereas Locke’s life as Robertson is shaped by the continuous effort to elude the reductiveness and possessiveness of naming, Peter ends by embracing all the fixity that his new role as the perfect Armenian son entails. This, at least, is what the motto on his T-shirt appears to indicate. Unlike Locke, he fully accepts, even enjoys, the confinement into another man’s name that his regained freedom implies. However, one could also note that the motto ‘Deryan and Son’ is printed on fabric. Such a juxtaposition of naming and clothing is very suggestive, as the latter leads us back to a scenario of interchangeable layers and envelopes of the human body that mediate our social interactions. This perspective, indeed, guided my analysis in Chapter Two. I would therefore contend that Egoyan’s attention to clothing invests Peter’s final choice with a sense of openness and ambiguity. As we have seen, the symbolic importance of garments is also enhanced by the painting of an empty sweater figuring in Azah’s bedroom, visible in one of the still shots that compose the film’s credits (figure 3.a). This could be a further sign that, although Peter seemingly opts for the most stable facets of identity, the equilibrium he finally achieves is but a temporary condition, which has its reason in movement, fluctuating affiliations, and the nomadic awareness that, in liquid modernity, conventional resources for identity construction are not available as easily as before.

In this regard, I would take issue with readings of the film indicating that Peter’s identity theft is motivated by his aspirations to wholeness and stability. Motifs of staging, multilingualism, and, as I now go on to demonstrate, eating, entail the abrogation of ideas of purity and completeness in relation to our multiple selves. I therefore distance myself from critical approaches that do not acknowledge the fact that Next of Kin articulates fluid, unstable, and inherently contaminated notions of identity. Naficy, for instance, asserts that Egoyan’s film does not repress but valorises ethnicity, because the Armenian family is eventually privileged over its WASP equivalent.¹⁰³ Moreover, he adds that:

In exilic situations, especially for first-generation exiles, born in one country and reared in another, there is a prior identity, an original sense of the self at home, that they compare themselves with and to which many of them long to return. The juxtaposition of the originary self and the new evolving self creates hybridized performances […].

¹⁰³ Naficy, p. 283.
In such performances, the homeland is often the source of the true original identity to which exilic identity is a poor imitation.\textsuperscript{104}

I would question the validity of this contention when extended to Egoyan’s cinema. Nomadism as an anti-essentialist theoretical framework enabled me to prove that \textit{Next of Kin} not only resists the binary logics of dichotomies, but also shows how permeable the boundaries between different categories of identity can be. As a result, situating the juxtaposition between copy and original at the centre of Egoyan’s oeuvre would be, in my view, reductive. Naficy’s reading of the film is not devoid of all essentialist thinking here, in that it presupposes the attribution of an immutable status to Egoyan himself – the condition of émigré, which delimits the scope of his directorial practice in a somewhat deterministic fashion. The following extract can corroborate this point further, and is indicative of the radical destabilisation of boundaries permeating Egoyan’s cinematic vision. The filmmaker hints at the psychological dimensions inherent in the national and extra-national dichotomy as he states:

\begin{quote}
The idea of nation is something which fascinates me. If we are to presume that a nation is the result of a collective projection, then it is clear that the idea of national territory is more of a psychological concept than it is a definition set by physical borders.\textsuperscript{105}
\end{quote}

Naficy writes that: ‘[e]ven in the most radical of exilically accented films, there are moments of sedimentation, moments of so-called authenticity, when the copy corresponds more or less fully to the original, bringing to a temporary end the chain of repetiton, signification, and mediation.’\textsuperscript{106} There certainly exist a few moments in Egoyan’s cinema where the play of mediation is temporarily suspended – the embrace between Eric and Francis in \textit{Exotica}, for instance, or the kiss between Lance and Lisa at the end of \textit{Speaking Parts}, as Naficy himself indicates. However, I would not say that this assertion applies to \textit{Next of Kin}. Peter’s homecoming journey is so ambiguous and ethically questionable that it dissolves rather than cultivates myths of origin and authenticity. Shary, to quote another example, maintains that ‘[i]t is only when Egoyan’s protagonists abandon the image process – as Peter leaves his video therapy […] – that they

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{104} Naficy, p. 285.  
\textsuperscript{105} Egoyan, ‘An Essay on Calendar’, pp. 93-97 (p. 93).  
\textsuperscript{106} Naficy, p. 286.
\end{footnotes}
achieve harmony with the loved ones in their lives.\footnote{Shary, p. 26.} I would rather align myself with Wilson’s view: Peter’s move to a different family does not reflect a move ‘from model to copy but from copy to copy’. The question one should pose, therefore, is ‘whether Peter ever leaves video therapy’, since ‘while he exits its screens, and his own family, Peter is still following the dictates of such therapy with the Deryans, only repeating its mechanisms in a parodic and aberrant manner.\footnote{Wilson, \textit{Atom Egoyan}, pp. 21-22.}

Significantly, the tension between self and other, national and extra-national, is reflected at the level of reproduction technologies, in the tension between copy and original.\footnote{Stolar, ‘The Double’s Choice’, pp. 177-192 (p. 178).} The highly mediated worlds in which the two films are set, in fact, work to legitimate a constant challenge to the hierarchical order between an authoritative model and its replica. I will return to this scenario in 3.3. For the moment, what I want to emphasise is that both films (but particularly Egoyan’s) correlate the proliferation of mediating technologies with a wider and more general impossibility to divide the world into poles of authenticity versus emulation. The existence of homogenised and naturalised categories of identity, as a result, is not endorsed, but radically undermined. This, of course, entails that there is a great deal of common ground between the directors’ critique of technological representation and their approach to the national space. Stolar, whose analysis of \textit{Next of Kin} has the merit of engaging themes of migration and technological mediation in a constructive dialogue with each other, writes:

\begin{quote}
[T]he power of Egoyan’s central characters remains in their doubleness, in their being split subjects. Understanding the dichotomy of Egoyan’s split subjects demands resisting the desire to make one part real and the other a copy, or else to make both parts fit neatly together to produce a desirable whole. The dichotomy of these characters emphasizes instead that within the ruptures and asymmetry of the split subject lie the possibilities for new relationships to develop between the two unequal parts.\footnote{Stolar, ‘The Double’s Choice’, pp. 177-192 (p. 191).}
\end{quote}

In this subsection, I contend that the trope of ingestion can provide new insights into the characters’ urge to defile their identity. Transgression and desire are linked in \textit{The Passenger} and \textit{Next of Kin}, and the outcome of these voluntary

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnotetext{Shary, p. 26.}
\footnotetext{Wilson, \textit{Atom Egoyan}, pp. 21-22.}
\footnotetext{Stolar, ‘The Double’s Choice’, pp. 177-192 (p. 178).}
\footnotetext{Stolar, ‘The Double’s Choice’, pp. 177-192 (p. 191).}
\end{footnotesize}
acts of contamination echoes the disruption of naturalness that emerged from my analysis of *Blow-Up* and *Speaking Parts*. In both cases, the point is whether a given boundary turns out to be a hermetic barrier that insulates a system against what is not part of it, or a permeable membrane that both connects and separates. A third and potentially devastating option is a boundary that splits open, letting its contents flow freely and contaminate what lies outside. This, as I shall explain in the following section, is the case of Locke: what we finally witness in Antonioni’s film is the complete erosion of the boundaries of the self, which the final long-take so exquisitely exemplifies.

In *Next of Kin*, ethnic food plays a key role as an agent of both mediation and contamination. As previously hinted at, the Armenian family gathering is a recurrent cinematic motif that provides, first of all, a showcase for ethnic difference. Food sharing works as a ritual of cultural mediation in the sense that it celebrates and expands the Deryans’ collective identity, which is put forward in opposition to the bland, aseptic birthday lunch of Peter and his biological parents. Egoyan’s character is an upper-middle-class white Anglo-Saxon man, like Antonioni’s, a position that, in Western culture, has come to stand for a neutral, average way of being human. For Peter, ethnic food designates the physical incorporation of his cultural other: if ethnicity is crystallised through food, then food is the medium that allows his body to internalise it. Through this wanted violation of corporeal boundaries, ethnicity is finally made tangible, established in a material form, and willingly assimilated.

The theory of abjection, detailed in the previous chapters, provides a suitable framework for a discussion of the imagery of food in Egoyan’s film. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva draws attention to the significance of orality as a fundamental boundary of the self that is transgressed in the act of eating, and links food to the relationship between mother and child: ‘food is the oral object (the abject) that sets up archaic relationships between the human being and the other, its mother, who wields a power that is as vital as it is fierce.’ Food passes in and out of the body; for this reason, it is endowed with the power of revealing the illusion of corporeal boundaries. Kristeva also reminds us that all types of food are vulnerable to impurity, and have a potential to defile: food becomes a polluting object particularly when ‘it is a border between two distinct

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111 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 75-76.
entities or territories'. Through its abject qualities, food strongly implies the fluid, porous bounds of personhood. If we are to consider the human body as a metaphor for society, it then becomes clear that Egoyan’s insistence on eating as an ethnically coded activity bespeaks the permeable borders of the nation state, whose stability it metaphorically disrupts. Thus, looked at from a Kristevan angle, the imagery of food and meals in Next of Kin suggests not only the shifting nature of bodily boundaries, but also the profound instability of any ethnic or national category.

It can be relevant, at this point, to highlight the nexus of horror and desire that food ingestion articulates. Eating denotes a fundamental slippage between notions of purity and defilement – to use Kristeva’s phrasing, ‘a lust for swallowing up the other, while the fear of impure nourishment is revealed as deathly drive to devour the other.’ We have just seen how, on a figurative level, Egoyan’s use of ethnic food signifies the artificiality of unique and coherent identities: the family meals do mediate Peter’s entry into his new community, but simultaneously create new scenarios for abjection to arise. This kind of pressure exerted on the margins of a system is no doubt destabilising, yet it does not exhaust itself in a feeling of repulsion. On the contrary, it generates a strong force of attraction, for terror and desire are inextricably interwoven in the experience of the abject, nourishing each other in reciprocal fashion.

I would therefore propose to read the motif of the identity theft in terms of a drive to be contaminated by an external, coloured other. On a narrative level, evidence of this also lies in the fact that the presence of causal or motivational factors is, in both films, reduced to a minimum. Locke and Peter find themselves presented with an opportunity that happens by chance; they take it voluntarily and spontaneously, their apparent purpose being to escape from a condition of invisibility and boredom. In fact, one could see their masquerades as intentional and largely unmotivated acts of stealing: apart from the failure of Locke and Rachel’s marriage in The Passenger, and from Peter’s overprotective biological parents in Next of Kin, there is little or nothing that rationally explains the protagonists’ behaviour. This, I shall argue, is triggered by a latent need to find

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112 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p. 75.
113 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p. 118.
a way out of whiteness in the sense of blandness, blankness, and, particularly for the passenger, absence of true involvement with the reality he reports.

The theme of the journey within and across national borders comes thus to define a move away from a position of non-particularity and ordinariness that is aseptically unmarked, yet subtly tinged with death, and the embrace of an aesthetic of defilement, undecipherable languages, and cultural foreignness. Contamination by non-whiteness, in other words, represents the only possible way for the protagonists to face up to the terror of nothingness, and feel alive. In this respect, it is important to acknowledge Robertson’s and Locke’s different approaches towards Africa’s struggle for decolonisation: while the former takes a committed stance, supplying arms for the revolutionary army, the latter does not oppose any resistance to what his interviewees say, even if he knows they are lying. Rachel is particularly critical of his passivity: ‘You put yourself in real situations, but then you have no dialogue.’ Peter’s story follows the same path: his disinterest in the world around him disappears as soon as he assumes another man’s identity. As regards Egoyan’s film, however, there is one aspect in particular that deserves more attention. If we accept that the Deryans’ behaviour is somewhat blind, or at least ambiguous, we may argue that they too fall back on forms of identity staining and contamination, with the only purpose of comforting their grief. Yet what are the ideological implications of acknowledging the contaminating force of whiteness?

As pointed out in subsection 3.2.1, Peter’s journey of discovery reflects the filmmaker’s own appropriation of an ethnic background. Yet the fact that Egoyan chose his double to be the prototypical Anglo-Saxon young man cannot be overlooked. In an interview he gave to José Arroyo in 1987, he stated:

I would be misleading anyone if I was to try and tell them I was ethnic. There’s an element in me which is, but there’s also an element in me which has gone through the Canadian English school system and that is WASP. The WASP young man is the blank canvas in my films. That’s the character that for me is easiest to paint, who I can also feel very close to.

It could be argued that the very perspective of *Next of Kin* bespeaks the hegemonic role of white men in the visual media, and the way in which this form

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114 Passage transcribed from film.
115 Arroyo, p. 18.
of dominance is preserved through its own display. It also bespeaks the position of ordinariness that white people have taken up in the Western world: the power of whiteness arises from its claims to universality, from its aspiration to speak for the commonality of humanity – to be, in short, ‘without properties, unmarked, universal, just human’. In his influential study on the representation of whiteness in Western visual culture, Dyer offers a useful theoretical ground for interrogating the intersection of the contamination of identity and the politics of whiteness in the two selected films. ‘[W]hite people’ – he writes – ‘create the dominant images of the world and don’t quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image.’ With such a concept in mind, and regarding the autobiographical theme of homecoming that links Peter to Egoyan, it could be argued that contamination by whiteness does exist in this context, and takes various forms. One of them speaks directly to the process that the filmmaker himself, as a young man, was deeply involved with: cultural assimilation, or, the compliance with the values and expectations of a normative white society. The shifting boundaries and internal hierarchies of whiteness as a category, or the fact itself that some people are deemed to be whiter than others, hint at whiteness’s fundamental instability. In this condition also lies, I would argue, its potential to defile.

Dyer’s inquiry into the representation of white bodies deals not only with the visual rendering of whiteness qua whiteness, but also with a notion of embodiment, ‘of whiteness involving something that is in but not of the body’. Pure whiteness is an unattainable ideal, and not just because ‘white skin can never be hue white, but because ideally white is absence: to be really, absolutely white is to be nothing.’ Dyer identifies a paradox at the centre of white representation, which reflects itself in various forms of white embodiment. This is the mythical struggle between body and spirit, the imperative to reconcile individuality with universality, the commitment to the physical world with the willingness to master impulses and transcend the material. The contradictory character of white embodiment manifests itself in all the three elements that, according to Dyer, constitute the cultural register of whiteness:

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117 Dyer, p. 9.
120 Dyer, p. 78.
121 Dyer, pp. 39-40.
Christianity, race, and enterprise/imperialism. Of particular interest to my film analysis is the latter embodiment, which plays a major part in defining Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s white protagonists. This framework opens up interesting possibilities for thinking about how the two films establish the theme of contamination in relation to whiteness, and its associated expansionist ideology.

The act of the identity theft could be aptly described in terms of an aggressive expansion of the horizons of whiteness, whose most obvious and important subtext lies in the colonial discourse. Dyer postulates a connection between the colour white and the spirit of imperialism, highlighting that ‘[e]nterprise as an aspect of spirit is associated with the concept of will – the control of self and the control of others.’\textsuperscript{122} We are reminded, here, of Peter’s admiration for the distanced role of therapists, whose power to give direction to people’s lives he first envies and then emulates. Seen in this light, his appropriation of another man’s identity turns into an exercise of dominance and predatory behaviour, which evokes old forms of colonial invasion and settlement: ‘I want control now’, he declares.\textsuperscript{123} The imperialistic overtones of Peter’s relation to the Deryans are evident if one thinks of how he, as a white man, sorts out the problems that they cannot sort out for themselves. Regarding Antonioni’s film, however, additional clarification is necessary.

Whilst it is in fact true that Locke and Robertson share the same skin colour, as Dyer’s scholarship makes clear, whiteness is not simply a matter of racial designation. The way in which the two characters embody whiteness is indeed radically different. For Dyer, who examines imperialism particularly through the Western genre, what has been more fundamental in the construction of the ideal of whiteness is, more than racial distinction in itself, ‘the attainment of a position of disinterest – abstraction, distance, separation, objectivity – which creates a public sphere that is the mark of civilisation, itself the aim of human history.’ Drawing on the theories developed by postcolonial scholar David Lloyd, Dyer terms this mode of being the ‘Subject without properties’, positing that it ‘provides the philosophical underpinning of the conception of white people [...] as everything and nothing.’\textsuperscript{124} 

\textsuperscript{122} Dyer, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{123} Passage transcribed from film.
reiterates a culturally normative subject position in Western visual culture, that of the heterosexual white male: white power ‘reproduces itself regardless of intention, power differences and goodwill, and overwhelmingly because it is not seen as whiteness, but as normal.’

In *The Passenger*, Robertson is not *symbolically* white as a result of his active involvement in the rebels’ cause. Only Locke embodies whiteness in the sense of an abstract, disinterested and regulative way of being human. The reporter’s successful career is built on the conviction that he can actually occupy the position of an invisible watcher, and mediating technology serves precisely to fuel this illusion, that of inhabiting the realm of the unseen, of being an unmarked, quasi-divine observing subject without properties. As Orr points out, ‘Antonioni’s reporter is upended by his logos of BBC neutrality, the new British quest for “objectivity” that is meant to signify the absolute end of colonial power and a new enlightened positioning.’ What Locke’s recording devices are concerned with is indeed objectivity, as opposed to the dissolving subjectivity of memory and identity. Anticipating, perhaps, the discourse on spatiality and mediating technologies that I will develop in the following section, I want to quote what Brunette writes regarding Antonioni’s camera in *The Passenger*, and particularly the way in which, by privileging objective over subjective shots, it signifies a radical eschewal of the individual:

> [P]aradoxically, the effect of this ‘objectivity,’ especially given the unconventionality of the film’s narrative and cinematic technique, is to insist even more strongly on the presence of a new subjectivity, that of the *director*. The splitting of perspective between these two subjectivities thus makes us aware of the contingency of subjectivity itself, calling it into question.  

If one recognises that *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin* voice a certain misgiving about whiteness (not intended as a quality of the body, but as a symbolic value of the spirit), what justifies the disavowal of such a powerful, normative way of being human? Dyer’s scholarly work offers the theoretical tools for answering this question. The absence of colour that our cultural construction of whiteness articulates raises the spectre of non-existence, or death: ‘[t]o be positioned as an over-seeing subject without properties may lead one to wonder if one is a

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125 Dyer, p. 10.  
126 Orr, ‘Camus and Carné transformed’.  
127 Brunette, p. 134, author’s emphasis.
subject at all.’

If, in other words, whiteness aspires to invisibility and disembodiment, then death is the extreme version of it. The association between whiteness and death takes several forms: at one level, it is the logical outcome of the way in which, from a historical point of view, white people acted in many instances as bringers of death to non-white people. At another level, it originates from a romantic notion of ‘sublime pallor’, a harbinger of fatal disease, as well as from a perception of whites as living cadavers on the part of non-whites.

In the final chapter of his study, Dyer analyses how horror films like *The Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1969), or science fiction movies like *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), in reworking the horror of extreme whiteness, touch on ‘the suspicion that white man, in his retreat from the coloured hordes, has nothing in his self to fall back on’.

This suspicion, I would argue, is noticeable also in *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin*, and is the main factor underlying the desire for contamination that culminates in the identity exchange itself. Whiteness as an ideal is haunted by a sense of anxiety, for to relinquish stains and an imagery of darkness is also to relinquish a constitutive part of our humanity – colour, visibility, and corporeal pleasure.

‘What makes whites special’, Dyer writes, ‘is the light within, though modern man must struggle to see, let alone regain this. This light, which is white, is dirtied (“stained”) by blood, passion, movement, which is to say, isn’t it, life.’ Quoting Toni Morrison’s study on the function of non-white characters in the context of US literature, Dyer asserts that the dark qualities embodied by non-whites – in this case, enslaved people in the US – ‘were by no means only intensely despised, they were intensely desired as well, to the point that they, that dark qualities, seemed to be the only real, palpable qualities.’

With regard to this, it is also important to take into account gender. As explained in 3.1, Azah becomes Peter’s silent accomplice, whilst the girl is the one who persuades Locke to continue their journey when he is tempted to give up. The fact that the two women act as a catalyst in fostering the staining of male identities is revealing. It hints at the possibility that ethnicity and gender work together as channels of disruption and contamination of normative models.

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128 Dyer, p. 207.
130 Dyer, p. 215.
131 Dyer, pp. 80-81.
132 Dyer, pp. 207-208.
133 Dyer, p. 80.
of being. In *Next of Kin*, this is confirmed by the fact that the director’s self-conscious dissemination of stereotypes conflates a number of racist and sexist issues (these are discussed at the end of subsection 3.2.1). Because of their social marginality, both female and non-white characters are cast on the other side of the normative/non-normative divide, further away from the protagonists who act, by contrast, as humanity’s most ordinary and unremarkable representatives. Significantly, not only do the girl and Azah voice a critique of normative states of existence, they are also responsible, at least in part, for their final deterioration, or irreversible pollution.

In this subsection, I navigated through various manifestations of the desire for contamination in *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin*, whilst continuing to argue for a repositioning of Egoyan’s cinema in a non-strictly diasporic context. I proposed to read the evocative images of food sharing rituals in *Next of Kin* as a metaphor for a drive to devour a perceived non-white other. Dyer’s scholarly work on whiteness enabled me to demonstrate the suitability of such a critical framework for *The Passenger*, and, more importantly, it helped to pinpoint the possible ideological and political subtexts of Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s filmic rendering of expanding whiteness: a residue of imperialistic structures, and, in the specific context of 1980s Canadian multiculturalism, assimilative practices. What I wanted to emphasise, however, is the way in which these paired films tinge phenomena of contamination with an element of intentionality. One might note that, unlike the films *Il deserto rosso* and *The Adjuster*, here we cannot talk of a chromophobic impulse. Quite the opposite: colour has come to stand for a desirable property, especially for subjects that, somewhat contradictorily, thrive on invisibility, but are also horrified at the spectre of nothingness.

### 3.3 The Distracted Camera

This section extends the reading conducted in 3.2 by focusing on how the contamination of notions of identity is articulated at the level of cinematography, and particularly camera movement, framing, and spatiality. Such an approach provides a critical vantage point from which to consider the aspects of abjection and desire that, as shown in the previous section, conflate in the experience of the identity shift. It therefore correlates various settings of the two films with the
theme of contamination, and pays particular attention to the ways in which these processes engage with mediation technologies. If section 3.2 entered into critical dialogue with studies that examine *Next of Kin* exclusively through the diasporic or exilic lens, here I want to pave the way for an exploration of Antonioni’s directorial practice in a transnational frame. This contextualisation, further developed in the Conclusion, is necessary to achieve an understanding of the continuing influence exerted by his cinema on filmmakers from all over the world.

Before turning to this new phase of my discussion, however, I intend to highlight a fundamental element of incompatibility between the aesthetics of *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin*. As Egoyan himself asserts in an interview given to CBC radio host Peter Gzowski in 1985, for the filming of *Next of Kin* he took inspiration from a tradition of Italian neorealism, which is at odds with the films of Antonioni’s cinematic maturity. Egoyan’s debt to the legacy of neorealism emerges in long, unedited shots; a working-class setting; characters who speak with an accent; and the use of ‘authentic’-looking, non-professional actors (Berge Fazlian is an exception, as he is a star of Lebanese cinema; Sirvart Fazlian, his actual wife, had never been on film before). To quote a passage from the interview:

> If we had a higher budget, we would have had to put together a package, and when you put together a package you have to have names, starts. And that would have meant that we couldn’t have done what we did in this film, which was to go into the community centres [...] and try to find actors who perhaps didn’t even speak English [...]. The beauty of film is that you just have to try and get a performance, and once you get it, it’s there. It’s not as though you have to be able to endow the actor with a certain technique or craft so they can duplicate the performance again, and again, and again, which they would have to do on staged sets. [...] If the environment is right, if there is a real rapport between the crew, and the director, and the actors [...] it’s amazing the performance that you can draw. Of course [...] there is a long, long tradition of this in film, with the neorealism in Italy.¹³⁴

In *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, Marcus synthesises the ‘rules governing neorealist practice’ as follows:

[L]ocation shooting, lengthy takes, unobtrusive editing, natural lighting, a predominance of medium and long shots, respect for the

¹³⁴ Egoyan, ‘Atom Egoyan’s *Next of Kin*’, in CBC Digital Archives.
continuity of time and space, use of contemporary, true-to-life subjects, an uncontrived, open-ended plot, working-class protagonists, a nonprofessional cast, dialogue in the vernacular, active viewer involvement, and implied social criticism.\textsuperscript{135}

Most of these technical characteristics resonate widely through Egoyan’s low-budget debut work. However, it is important to note that \textit{Next of Kin} distances itself from the neorealist tradition in one crucial aspect, which – in turn – encourages a comparison with Antonioni’s mature cinematic style. This relates to the detachment of the directors’ look, their ‘cold’ objectivism, a refusal to lapse into sentimentality, and reluctance to indicate any secure, pre-ordained order of things.

As a director renowned for challenging the safety of established modes of perception, Antonioni formulates a critique of the neorealist paradigm that consists – to borrow Brunette’s concise definition – in the rendition of a reality that is ‘always more than what can be seen’.\textsuperscript{136} Brunetta’s earlier analysis confirms this: he suggests that, in the particular case of Antonioni, the crisis of neorealism stems from a loss of faith in the representability of the real in objective terms. As the Italian film scholar explains:

Dopo la ricomposizione della realtà sulla base dell’antropocentrismo neorealista, le misure di relazione tra uomo e cose, tra uomo e uomo, vengono profondamente modificate. L’uomo antonioniano non è più centro e misura dello spazio e della realtà. Si muove e agisce con un rapporto di inadeguatezza e di asintonia rispetto agli altri e all’ambiente. Non trova la misura più giusta per comunicare, e neppure quella per essere semplicemente se stesso.\textsuperscript{137}

The echoes of this shift in perspective are evident in \textit{The Passenger}, especially if we think of this film in terms of the staining of Locke’s identity as an observing subject without properties, as proposed in subsection 3.2.2. Significantly, Rohdie argues that the crisis of identity portrayed in \textit{The Passenger}, as that of Clara Manni in \textit{La signora senza camelie} (Antonioni, 1953), is symptomatic of a

\textsuperscript{135} Marcus, p. 22.

\textsuperscript{136} Brunette, p. 30, author’s emphasis.

\textsuperscript{137} Gian Piero Brunetta, \textit{Storia del cinema italiano: dal 1945 agli anni ottanta} (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1982), p. 740. ‘After the recomposition of reality on the basis of neorealist anthropocentrism, the scale of the relationship of man with things and with other men is profoundly modified. The Antonionian man is no longer the centre and measure of space and reality. He moves and acts in a relationship of inadequacy and incongruity with respect to others and to his surroundings. He is no more able to find the right measure to communicate, not even that to be simply himself.’
loosening in the perception of a ‘divided and de-centred’ reality: Locke’s estranged look upon himself as ‘other’ questions the act of looking in itself, in a way that encompasses both the audience and the director.\textsuperscript{138} This implicitly casts doubt on a notion of ‘objectivity and comprehensibility of the external world’ that is at the root of the neorealist practice.\textsuperscript{139} Besides this, Rohdie draws attention to how Antonioni’s descriptions of events, settings and characters tend not to be anchored to an univocal or absolute meaning, while maintaining that it is exactly this ‘fragility’ of knowing – formerly recognised and praised by Barthes in his open letter ‘Dear Antonioni…’ – that distinguishes his methods of narration from those of neorealist filmmakers as diverse as Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, and Luchino Visconti:

It was as if Antonioni had taken his objectivity too far; not only was he distanced from the narrative, and his characters separated and distanced from each other, but they were disconnected too from their context. It was an objectivity that had seemingly gone beyond ‘realism’; in the distance of Antonioni’s look, in his reticence, indeed, in his refusal to presume to know or to suggest an order, the very reality and identity of things were made insecure. It was a step which many who had been involved in neo-realism found it immensely difficult to take.\textsuperscript{140}

Antonioni’s work differs from neorealism in another crucial regard: whereas many neorealist films encourage viewers to develop an emotional connection with their characters, those of the director of ‘alienation’ do not elicit any sympathy whatsoever, nor are they animated by the kind of humanism that one may encounter, for instance, in key neorealist works such as \textit{Ladri di biciclette} (De Sica, 1948) or \textit{Umberto D} (De Sica, 1952). These aesthetic qualities, which I suggest are shared by both Antonioni and Egoyan, are ‘the exact contrary of what, despite its apparent objectivism, neo-realism was thought of as

\textsuperscript{138} With regard to this, see also the concept of ‘visione estraniata’ (‘estranged vision’) formulated by Cuccu in relation to Antonioni’s cinema in the early 1970s, before the making of \textit{The Passenger}: ‘una forma di visione le cui strutture o articolazioni spazio-temporali svolgono una funzione per così dire “autorappresentativa”, nel senso che servono a rendere percepibile e a fare protagonista dell’immagine filmica, \textit{l’esperienza visiva che l’autore viene compiendo sul mondo visibile}, nelle sue varie possibilità di articolazioni e di specificazione e dunque nella sua mobilità e pluridirezionalità di relazioni.’ Cuccu, \textit{La visione come problema: Forme e svolgimento del cinema di Antonioni} (Rome: Bulzoni, 1973), p. 137, author’s emphasis. [A] form of vision whose structures or spatiotemporal articulations have – so to speak – a “self-representative” function; that is to say, they make perceptible and protagonist of the filmic image the visual experience that the author is operating on the visible world, in its various possibilities of articulation and specification, and hence in its mobility and multi-directionality of relations.

\textsuperscript{139} Rohdie, p. 72.

\textsuperscript{140} Rohdie, pp. 47-48.
possessing: warmth, love, the glow of humanity, a hope for the future.” It is no coincidence, then, that the negative appraisals of the directors’ œuvres are substantially the same, or of a similar nature. Detractors have repeatedly categorised Antonioni and Egoyan as dispassionate, pretentious, pessimistic, and impenetrable filmmakers. Amongst the most persistent accusations laid against Antonioni throughout his career are those of narrative opacity, dead times, mannerism, and rigid aesthetic formalism. In his essay ‘White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art’, written in 1962, Manny Farber takes Antonioni’s films as examples of ‘white elephant art’, in a pejorative sense. He disdains in particular the director’s tendency to approach his medium as a painting, arguing that it ‘results in a screen that is glassy, has a side-sliding motion, the feeling of people plastered against stripes or divided by verticals and horizontals.’ The main defect of Antonioni’s cinema is, for Farber, ‘fear, a fear of the potential life, rudeness, and outrageousness of a film.’ Egoyan’s early films have been likewise criticised for being cold and detached, and for the fact that characters are not instilled with a real sense of inner life.

In the previous two sections, my reading of The Passenger and Next of Kin demonstrated that the two films are closely comparable on a narrative and thematic level, as well as on the basis of the regime of schizophrenia that they similarly introduce. Although their denouements are very different, the ways in which the camera recreates the fluid boundaries of subjectivity, especially in two specific sequences, demand a paired analysis that acknowledges its connotations of impurity and contamination. Regarding The Passenger, the shot I am referring to is the long-take of seven minutes that begins inside the Hotel de la Gloria, circles around the external square, and then returns to film the inside of the hotel again (a closer description of this convoluted scene is provided in the first section of this chapter). It is my intention here to compare the most critically acclaimed sequence of The Passenger with the panning shot around the table towards the end of Next of Kin. At some point during the surprise party scene, Egoyan’s handheld camera shifts away from the narrative focus of attention: with an undulating, hypnotic movement, it pans across the

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141 Rohdie, p. 47.
unfamiliar faces of the guest crowd, amongst whom the filmmaker himself is clearly visible.

First of all, it is interesting to note how the cinematographic style of the birthday party is in stark contrast to that of the previous sequences, mostly consisting of fixed, brutally objective high-angle shots taken from the point of view of many surveillance cameras, or ‘mechanized, uniform, and fluid’ images, such as when the movements of the camera synchronise with the rhythm of the airport conveyor. There are two different shots that capture Toronto’s skyline, both lingering on one of the city’s architectural symbols and most famous landmarks, the Toronto City Hall, framed from the window of Peter’s skyscraper hotel room. In one of these shots, the sight of a gathering crowd is filtered through the impassive eye of a high-angle steady camera, which then zooms out so as to include Peter and a Canadian flag in the frame. One might argue that a similarly estranged shooting technique is the trademark of The Passenger. Underscoring this point, and the objectivity of both camera and narration, Rohdie advances the idea that ‘The Passenger is a documentary of a fiction rather more than it is a fictional narrative’. This statement seems due to a number of technical factors, among which are the film’s slow-paced rhythm, its detached point of view, the director’s characteristic hypnotic look on spatial emptiness, and his rare use of shot/reverse-shot cutting. Let us note, for instance, how this mechanism is subtly disturbed by the brief intrusion of shots taken from a greater distance in the scene where Locke and the girl are seated at a bar.

What Egoyan’s long-take shares with Antonioni’s is the way in which the camera distracts itself. It does not follow the lead character at the time when the narrative reaches its climax – such as Locke’s assassination or Peter’s birthday speech – but lingers instead on marginal events, or extras that viewers will never get to know. In disregarding the story as it unfolds, these diversionary moments allow the directors to de-centralise the protagonist, divert attention away from the plot, and undermine established conventions about what is worth showing in film. Regarding this, Rohdie’s observations about Antonioni’s long-take could be extended to Egoyan’s: ‘it has always been permissible for Antonioni’s camera, like his characters, to wander away from a centre, until the

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144 Naficy, p. 264.
145 Wilson, Atom Egoyan, p. 12.
146 Rohdie, p. 153.
entire notion of centre and periphery, significance and non-significance, ceases to have much meaning.\textsuperscript{\textemdash}\textsuperscript{147} In particular, the film scholar establishes a link between a tradition of documentarism in cinema, and the freedom that the camera achieves at the end of \textit{The Passenger}. Eventually, he argues, the objectivity of Antonioni’s look, its reticence to possess the pro-filmic events, turns into a reflection on the act of seeing itself: ‘Antonioni no longer needed a narrative excuse for what he viewed. The narrative was elsewhere. He was not involved.’\textsuperscript{\textemdash}\textsuperscript{148}

The de-centralising process triggered by the camera creates an illusion of ocular freedom that is the cinematic counterpart of the protagonists’ own quest for liberty, and of Locke’s disappearance as a subject. This point leads me to conclude that, firstly, the directors share an interest for what is interstitial and unstable. Narrator and narrated, subject and object, as well as on-screen and off-screen space, have all been erased as separate and independent realms. Secondly, one might read the somewhat casual and impure camera movements of the two long-takes as a further sign of the intertwinenment of scenarios of mediation and contamination in Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s films. This encounter is not necessarily positive or negative; it is only one critically neglected aspect of the way in which their approaches to cinema relate to the uncertainties of the modern experience.

The paired long-takes can thus be said to negotiate with the viewer a borderline space of indeterminateness and hybridity: contamination, which in this chapter was mostly identified with a fantasy of becoming ‘other’, is evoked by the impossibility of controlling and decoding that which the wandering, distracted camera frames and records. To investigate this point further, let us turn to examine issues of technological mediation, and more specifically, the frequent incorporations of videos, diegetic monitors, and photographs that, most notably in \textit{The Passenger}, are associated with a concern for what it means to document and to report the real.

The directors’ attention to recording technology in relation to identity seems due to the fact that memories are commonly regarded as the touchstone of subjectivity. Photography and video, indeed, are widely used as prosthetic devices to enhance and extend human memory. ‘To photograph’, Susan

\textsuperscript{147} Rohdie, p. 148.
\textsuperscript{148} Rohdie, pp. 149-153.
Sontag has argued, ‘is to appropriate the thing photographed.’ The most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise’, she writes, ‘is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads – as an anthology of images.’ In *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin*, diegetic still and moving images perform a crucial role, exemplified by the family album that Peter and Azah leaf through: they provide tangible evidence of a personal history, that is, a defence against the anxieties of an identity that is dispersing itself. Braidotti’s nomadic mode, as stated in 3.2.1, would significantly translate into a tense denoting a past action still *in progress*. At the same time, photographic representation functions similarly to clothing, cages, and acts of naming for the way in which it imprisons its subject, and converts reality into an inanimate object of consumption, easy to carry, provide, and accumulate. It could also be argued that the symbolism of spaces echoes this dualism between closure and openness. The former is reflected in the many rooms that metaphorically hold the subject together: this is where identity is temporarily contained, bounded by walls that resonate with the qualities of the rectangular edges of the frame (the term *camera* means ‘room’ in Latin). In contrast to these indoor settings, Antonioni integrates several desert or barren landscapes in *The Passenger*. These suggest an opposite position – one in which the expansiveness of nature encounters an equally uncontainable self.

As Wilson remarks, the screen onto which Peter plays the Deryans’ videocassette is a virtual space of mediation and intersection. It yields access to a distinct cultural space, and permits the viewer to experience Canadian identity in a different manner: from the predominantly WASP West Coast, to the very heart of the Armenian community in Toronto. At a spatial level, this transition is mirrored by a drastic shift in location, from the Fosters’ upper-class house to Toronto’s ethnic enclave, Kensington Market, where Peter and Sonya go shopping together. Here I propose that concepts developed in postcolonial theories, such as third space and hybridity, can provide new insights into the significance of this location to *Next of Kin*. Such a perspective corroborates the film analysis developed in 3.2.1, particularly in terms of the inadequacy of essentialist approaches based on allegedly fixed, holistic, and homogeneous categories – the national, the exilic, and the diasporic.

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150 Sontag, p. 3.
Bhabha conceptualises the notion of third space as one of construction, contradiction, and renegotiation of identity that has, as its precondition, the disavowal of colonial cultural authority, and the undermining of oppositional polarities.\(^{152}\) The third space opens up a productive discourse for thinking about the rise of a political object that is ‘hybrid – neither the one thing nor the other’.\(^{153}\) The district of Kensington Market, known for being home to numbers of migrants and refugees from all over the world, arguably qualifies as third space. It is, in fact, a place that exists in-between the dichotomies of ethnic and Canadian, Western and Eastern, colonisers and colonised – a territory of dialogue and ambiguity, which escapes the dogmatism of prevailing powers. In Bhabha’s theoretical framework, the notion of hybridity is employed to reveal that the original purity or authenticity of cultures is untenable, and hence to contradict essentialist characterisations of nationhood in general. As he writes:

\[\text{[T]he theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity. To that end we should remember that it is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the ‘people’. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.}\(^{154}\)

The space that Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s distracted cameras articulate is similarly hybrid in the sense that it carries the meaning of both films, their denouements, whilst envisaging a cinematic territory of in-betweenness. This, as previously discussed, is not entirely governed by the laws of cinematic storytelling: the unfolding fiction, what we might identify as the ‘first space’ of a film, is denied to the audience. At the same time, however, the distracted camera does not go so far as to break all the conventions of realism, that is, it does not fully reveal its presence by filming itself, or the equipment that allowed for the film to be made. Nor is this sort of ‘second space’ made visible. The way in which Antonioni and Egoyan hint at the leakiness of the frame is indeed much subtler than this. The distracted camera is cast adrift, and its floating


\(^{153}\) Bhabha, p. 33.

\(^{154}\) Bhabha, pp. 38-39, author’s emphasis.
encompasses a space that qualifies as third because it is neither inside nor outside the narration, but rather a fusion of the two. Both long-takes are articulated around a circular movement, and it is relevant that the sounds which are more significant at a fictional level are originated off-screen. With his experimental technique (the scene famously took eleven days to shoot), Antonioni seems to want to annihilate the mediation of the camera completely: by making it pass through the barred window, in defiance of the laws of physics, he signifies the dissolving not only of Locke’s identity, but also of the act of filmmaking itself. What is left behind are an aerial, upsettingly disembodied entity, and the unmasking of a hybrid, contaminated territory of spatial deviation that reproduces the experience of passing through a foreign land, of hearing a foreign tongue. Originated within the fiction, this space never leaves cinema as a medium; rather, it leaves the scene through cinema.
Conclusion
The Film They Never Made

If I had made it, it would have been a film about the night and the mingling of people’s loneliness. About this relationship between the inside and the outside.

Michelangelo Antonioni

In this Conclusion, I wish to return to the events that almost led Antonioni and Egoyan to make a film together between 1997 and 1998, outlined in the Introduction. The research conducted so far has entailed an in-depth examination of what came before this suspended artistic collaboration. My study was indeed inspired and animated by a major question, which has considerable impact at a methodological level: is Antonioni and Egoyan’s unrealised project merely the result of fortuitous circumstances? Or, does it reflect profound underlying affinities that invite us to look retrospectively at their oeuvres in a way that transcends dominant critical frameworks based on art-house, national, and diasporic paradigms?

Answering this question also means taking concerns about mediation and contamination to a further level of analysis. By encouraging us to discern a shared, common perspective in the auteurs’ cinematic visions, the unfinished film emerges as a potential agent of mediation between them. At the same time, by virtue of the creative ‘leakiness’ that it exemplifies, this scenario has allowed me to enter current debates about national and accented cinemas from a critical standpoint, in order to embrace a perspective of transnationalism in film studies. By prioritising a transnational reading, I did not deny the fact that Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s films are complexly interwoven with, and reflect, the specificities of a local history, or the experience of forced displacement and loss. Following the example of scholars Higbee and Lim, I hope to have demonstrated that all cinemas should be treated – to borrow Lim’s phrasing – ‘as particular, peculiar and provincial, while not discounting their abilities to communicate and connect

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beyond their cultural, linguistic, and formal specificities.\(^2\)

This is especially true for *Il deserto rosso* and *Next of Kin*, which were analysed against the backdrop of Italy’s economic miracle and postcolonial criticism, respectively. Without proposing to reject these approaches (which nevertheless continue to exert a significant influence), \(^3\) or to dismiss a considerable body of critical work that regards modernist ‘alienation’ as the central preoccupation of Antonioni’s vision, I have called for a methodological shift away from essentialist conceptualisations of both national culture and exilic identity in favour of transnational modes of experience. Recently, Rascaroli and Rhodes have advocated a rethinking of Antonioni’s oeuvre, describing it as ‘something highly distinctive and yet difficult to locate and demarcate’, and urging us to extend the understanding of its legacy to a transnational artistic milieu.\(^4\) The scholars, however, are mainly referring to contemporary East Asian cinema here, and in particular to auteurs such as Apitchatpong Weeresethakul, Edward Yang, Jia Zhangke, and Tsai Ming-liang, whose formal styles echo Antonioni’s – for example, in their use of *temps mort* and wandering camera movements, but also at a narrative and compositional level.\(^5\) Simultaneously, studies conducted by Higbee and Lim have demonstrated that diasporic filmmakers cannot be firmly situated in the interstices of national film practices, and that notions of diasporic cinema such as the accented model proposed by Naficy cannot account for frequent cases of contamination with a mainstream, commercial context. As Higbee and Lim maintain, these directors could be more productively discussed through the lens of the transnational.\(^6\)

The film Antonioni and Egoyan never made points to the importance of transcending restrictive methodological discourses when analysing their corpora. Such theories, I contend, must be seen as neither all-encompassing nor mutually exclusive, but rather as complementary to each other. The unrealised project signifies the assimilation of both a European art-house tradition and an accented, diasporic sensibility into more mainstream practices of film production and consumption (see also the Introduction). Most crucially, it invites us to acknowledge the porosity of the borders between their cinematic

\(^2\) Lim, pp. 129-144 (p. 142).
\(^3\) Higbee and Lim, p. 10.
\(^4\) Rascaroli and Rhodes, ‘Interstitial, Pretentious, Alienated, Dead’, pp. 1-17 (pp. 7-8).
\(^6\) Higbee and Lim, pp. 12-13.
languages, disrupting ideals of organic unity in relation to an auteur’s body of work, as well as within a single artistic product. Future research might address the conceptual framework that has developed here in more detail – especially in relation to Antonioni, who, as one of the most canonical figures in European modernist cinema, is implicitly associated with a principle of overall authorial unity, purity, and coherence. Informed by debates on authorship in film, this view also reminds us of the impossibility of clearly demarcating the boundaries of a director’s individual agency within the plurality of practices that film production requires.

In the final phase of my discussion, I shall attempt to reconstruct the complex genealogy of Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s unrealised film, focusing first of all on its production history. My aim is twofold: firstly, I seek to contribute towards filling a void in existing literature on the suspended project itself.\(^7\) Secondly, by integrating factual information with textual analysis, I aim to provide further evidence in support of the main argument of my thesis, which relates to the interweaving of practices of mediation and phenomena of contamination in the films of Antonioni and Egoyan. For this reason, I will attempt to create a dialogue between the script of *Just to Be Together* and the corpus explored in the previous chapters. This comparison will help me enhance and elucidate the main findings of my research.

Just when everyone imagined that *Beyond the Clouds* (1995) would be Antonioni’s last film, rumours started to circulate that the eighty-three-year-old director was already at work on another project. Thirteen years had passed since his previous feature, *Identification of a Woman* (1982), and in that lapse of time Antonioni suffered partial paralysis from a cardiovascular accident that left him virtually unable to speak. Eager to work on a film set again, the auteur turned to one of the short stories comprised in his own collection *Quel bowling sul Tevere* – ‘Due telegrammi’.\(^8\) Over the years, some details of the original narrative changed, and the subject was gradually adapted into a screenplay, co-written by Antonioni and Rudy Wurlitzer and entitled *Just to Be Together*.

In a note accompanying the script, French producers Alain Sarde and Stéphane Tchal Gadjieff explain the situation as follows:

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\(^7\) See also Antonioni, *Unfinished Business*, pp. 173-179. To my knowledge, a comprehensive study of the screenplay of *Just to Be Together* does not exist.

Michelangelo Antonioni is now eighty-three years old. Although he has remarkably recovered from his cardiovascular incident, he still has problems with his phonation and writing. But the difficulties in the body are literally supplanted, submerged by the flow of creative will-power which feeds this passionate filmmaker. His capacity for guiding those around him towards his choices and aspirations strike all who know him. The actors desiring to collaborate with Michelangelo for what is likely to be his last film, the capstone of an extraordinary artistic heritage, will be on an exceptional ‘Avventura’.¹⁹

The presence of a back-up director was a necessity considering Antonioni’s precarious health conditions. In an interview he gave to the Guardian, Wenders, who had met Antonioni at the 1982 Cannes Festival, recalled being approached by a producer following the director’s stroke in 1985.¹⁰ It was clear that at that point, without the help of a stand-by filmmaker, none of Antonioni’s film projects would meet the requirements of insurance companies. Wenders was asked to collaborate for a film based on ‘Due telegrammi’ in the late eighties: ‘for a time it looked as though the project [...] was going to happen.’¹¹ Due to a series of delays, however, he eventually dropped it, choosing instead to focus on the shooting of Bis ans Ende der Welt (1991).

In 1993, when Tchal Gadjieff offered Wenders the chance to participate in Beyond the Clouds, the project of ‘Due telegrammi’ was temporarily put on the back burner. It was then retrieved a few years later, and Egoyan was given the role of replacement director. He therefore consented to make himself available for the entire duration of the shooting of Just to Be Together, should anything incapacitate Antonioni in the making of the film. Among the material that Egoyan donated to the TIFF Film Reference Library in Toronto, is the copy of a draft but fully binding agreement, sent on 24 January 1997, setting down the conditions for his involvement.¹² Sunshine, the Paris-based production company that undertook the project, had planned for the preparation of the film to begin in February, up to the 1997 Cannes Film Festival in May. The shooting was initially expected to start at the beginning of June of the same year, and to last for three months. Egoyan’s assistance could have been required to revise

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¹⁹ From the Atom Egoyan archive, courtesy of TIFF Film Reference Library, Antonioni Correspondence, 2002-002-05.344.
¹¹ Wenders, p. 10.
¹² From the Atom Egoyan archive, courtesy of TIFF Film Reference Library, Antonioni Correspondence, 2002-002-05.346. Here the project is referred to as Histoire de rester ensemble.
the scenario, the cast, and the choice of locations. Moreover, he could have been called upon to stand in at any moment of the shooting stage, so as to ensure the successful completion of the film in the unfortunate event of a deterioration of Antonioni’s health. The replacement agreement also concerned the post-production phase: in case of inability on the part of Antonioni, Egoyan would have been responsible for the editing process.\(^{13}\)

What emerges from this scenario is that, if \textit{Just to Be Together} had been completed, it would have been more of an Antonioni than an Egoyan film. The cast, however, would have probably reached a mainstream audience, since Robin Wright and Sam Shepard were expected to star as the two protagonists. In October 1997, the Canadian director wrote a letter to Tchal Gadjieff and Sunshine, in which he reiterated all his ‘enthusiasm and complete support’ for Antonioni’s new film project:

\textbf{JUST TO BE TOGETHER} is a film that must be made, and I congratulate you in your efforts to produce this important film. Michelangelo Antonioni is one of the greatest living artists, and this film will be a stunning addition to his luminous filmography.\(^{14}\)

In the preface to the screenplay, Antonioni and Wurlitzer describe the film as dealing with:

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\text{[...] a woman’s struggle in what is still a man’s world: the exploitation of her beauty and energy, her fight to find her place, to assert herself, and to break free from the control of her husband and her lover, who seem to enjoy dominating her, inadvertently or otherwise.}\(^{15}\)
\]

The film’s key theme, I suggest, echoes a distinctive concern of Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s cinemas: to what extent can technology provide real and successful mediation between people? Louise, an architect, is in her office when she receives a fax from her husband, Robert, who has asked for a divorce. At a critical moment of both her personal and professional life, she desperately tries to establish a contact with an unknown man whom she sees in the opposite skyscraper. She sends him a fax, asking him to get in touch with her. The man,
referred to as ‘H’ in the screenplay, slides the fax out of the window.\textsuperscript{16} Louise’s attempt to overcome separation via technological means is in vain.

In ‘Due telegrammi’, Antonioni writes: ‘[l]e parole hanno un senso quando si ha davanti una faccia a cui rivolgerle o da evitare o a cui non parlare.’\textsuperscript{17} As if to cast doubt upon the effectiveness of technology as a mediator, the two telegrams (turned into faxes in the script) perform two opposing functions: the first leads to separation; the second looks for emotional connection, without success. It is clear that the peak moment in the narrative of \textit{Just to Be Together} resonates with the same ambivalence that, in Chapter Two, was attributed to \textit{Blow-Up} and \textit{Speaking Parts}: even though we use media technologies in our everyday lives, we often fail to recognise their divisive potential, the way in which they can cultivate non-communication, and obliterate meaning and emotions. Paradoxically, the plurality of technologies of representation and communication characterising the modern age has inhibited our ability to reach out to one another. Chapter Two addressed these issues through the lens of McLuhan’s dictum that ‘the media is the message’, and established a connection between modes of proliferation of photography in the 1960s and video technology in the 1980s. Drawing on McLuhan’s theories, it posited a relationship between visual and wearable technologies, regarding them as attempts to mediate the ultimate meaning of reality, or to get to the essence of a body. This framework induced me to interrogate the different ways in which \textit{Blow-Up} and \textit{Speaking Parts} enact distinctively posthuman concerns, and, most notably, to show how Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s reconfigurations of practices of technological mediation is profoundly embedded in a context of disruption and renegotiation of boundaries. In this pair of films, phenomena of contamination came to signify the obsolescence of the biological body, but also the dismantlement of the integrity of the image through processes of haunting, decomposition, and pixelation.

Returning to the script of \textit{Just to Be Together}, Antonioni and Wurlitzer explain the choice of Los Angeles as a location by pointing to the importance of showing the widening gap between a wealthy, powerful elite and a larger but

\textsuperscript{16} Antonioni Correspondence, 2002-002-05.344. \textit{Just to Be Together}, screenplay by Antonioni and Wurlitzer, pp. 67-68.

\textsuperscript{17} Antonioni, ‘Due telegrammi’, pp. 21-27 (p. 23). ‘Words make sense when there is a face in front of you that you can address or avoid or not talk to.’
impoverished segment of society. This aspect, which can be interpreted in terms of globalisation and liquid modernity, throws new light on the topics dealt with in Chapter One. The characters of the unfinished film are redolent of the emergent managerial elite of *Il deserto rosso*, albeit in a post-feminist cultural context. They belong to a bourgeois world that is afraid of losing its identity and social position. In one of the several flashbacks of the text, Louise and Robert are in a hotel in Naples. She would like to go into the streets and merge with the locals, but he discourages her, saying that he prefers to look at the narrow Neapolitan streets from the balcony. When Robert finally goes out, he becomes a victim of pickpockets. Louise’s urge for emotional and physical intimacy makes her reminiscent of several female characters portrayed by Vitti and Khanjian in Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s films. In Chapter One, the directors’ muses emerged as a major conduit for thinking about how practices of mediation and phenomena of contamination are closely interwoven. My analysis of *Il deserto rosso* and *The Adjuster* took this as a point of departure. Unfolding against a backdrop of industrialisation and modernisation processes, it brought to the fore neglected trajectories of mediation and contamination in a Baumanian context of liquidity. By delving into some pivotal elements of the directors’ cinematic languages – *mise-en-scène*, sound, and colour, which conventionally concretise and mediate meaning in film – I traced back the ways in which their aesthetics are permeated by a sense of leakiness, fluidity, and awareness of the instability of boundaries.

It could be argued that the screenplay of *Just to Be Together* expresses anxiety about contamination also through the motif of marital infidelity. Louise has a love affair with Nick; when she finally ends their relationship, he tries to shoot her. Besides, the script suggests that the film should rely on images of downtown Los Angeles and its multi-ethnic communities to reveal the social inequalities of the modern world, and to indicate the sense of insecurity and vulnerability felt by the protagonist. The act of viewing is presented as a destabilising force in more than one scene; this raises questions similar to those raised in *The Passenger* and *Next of Kin* – particularly with regard to issues of perception, neutrality, and ‘objective’ reporting. In Chapter Three, I investigated

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18 Antonioni Correspondence, 2002-002-05.344. *Just to Be Together*, preface to the screenplay by Antonioni and Wurlitzer.
how the directors’ discourses on the defilement of identity are underpinned by practices of technological mediation, and showed evidence that they adopt comparable cinematic strategies in relation to spatiality and camera mobility. My inquiry often relied on metaphors derived from feminist theories – the cyborg in Chapter Two and the nomad in Chapter Three – by virtue of their capacity to question the validity of notions of purity and fixity in a plethora of guises. This framework led me to postulate that an urge for contamination by non-whiteness – which Next of Kin also represents through metaphors of ingestion – might be what motivates the protagonists’ relinquishment of their position of power as humanity’s most non-specific representatives.

The present study was inspired by the recovery of neglected archival material that demonstrates Antonioni and Egoyan’s intention to collaborate with one another at a particular moment of their filmmaking careers, merging their artistic and authorial identities. It proceeded through a series of paired readings of films, framed within a wider theoretical context of transnational cinema. This concluding section allowed for an expanded, intertextual discussion of the main findings of my research in relation to the screenplay of Just to Be Together.

The close filmic analysis conducted in the three main chapters adopted a variety of theoretical lenses and critical frameworks on account of their capacity to underscore the relevance of images of mediation and corollary processes of contamination. These, as I have hopefully demonstrated, constitute a crucial yet overlooked dimension of Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s stylistic, formal, and thematic trajectories. As recent developments in media studies suggest, concepts of virality and technological mediation are closer than ever before. Such imbrication shapes our contemporary forms of engagement with social networks, as well as with information and communication technologies. Tony D. Sampson’s book Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks, in particular, employs models derived from contagion theory to investigate sociological phenomena in the age of networks, envisaging potential scenarios for future research, also in the field of film studies.20

In general terms, my work embraced different anti-essentialist positions as a means of uncovering the destabilisation of boundaries that permeates Antonioni’s and Egoyan’s aesthetics at various levels. In doing so, it showed

20 Tony D. Sampson, Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
that the imagery of leakiness and porosity that their films rely on is a constitutive part of the directors’ reconfigurations of modernity and its associated viewing practices. The same notions of contamination and border crossing informed my inquiry on a methodological level, and enabled me to bring to the fore Egoyan as an especially productive case study to shed light on the limitations of a theoretical model of diasporic or accented cinema. We have seen that such configurations tend to focus on questions of marginality and interstitality, failing to interrogate the interconnectedness with both mainstream and authorial film practices, and, moreover, ignoring the fact that diasporic discourses renegotiate a nation’s perception of itself. In their recent scholarship, Higbee and Lim have argued for a ‘critical transnationalism’ in film studies, a conceptual stance I have tried to adhere to in this thesis. Without dismissing the power-related dynamics that national borders impose on individuals, or the historical specificities of a particular filmic text, this model ‘understands the potential for local, regional, and diasporic film cultures to affect, subvert and transform national and transnational cinemas.’

Ultimately, my comparative study also proposes that our many categories of analysis are useful tools insofar as they do not prevent us from recognising unexpected connections and legacies, and insofar as we are disposed to acknowledge their profoundly liquid, unstable nature.

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21 Higbee and Lim, p. 18.
Illustrations

*This image has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons.*

Figure 1.a (*The Adjuster*, 00:36:22)

*This image has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons.*

Figure 1.b (*Il deserto rosso*, 00:17:43)

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Figure 1.c (*The Adjuster*, 01:26:33)
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Figure 2.a (*Blow-Up*, 00:52:33)

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Figure 2.b (*Blow-Up*, 01:19:09)

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Figure 2.c (*Speaking Parts*, 01:11:41)
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Figure 3.a (Next of Kin, 01:07:07)

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Figure 3.b (The Passenger, 00:58:15)

This image has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons.

Figure 3.c (Next of Kin, 00:33:03)
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Antonioni Correspondence, 2002-002-05.346; from the Atom Egoyan Archive, courtesy of TIFF Film Reference Library
Filmography

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