

Distinctness and Unity: the Issue of Canadianness as Displayed in Atom Egoyan's

The Sweet Hereafter

It is natural for every nation to search for and continually reinforce its own identity. The reasons for this are numerous – national identity performs different functions, of which two appear the most important: fulfilling the desire to distinguish oneself from other nations and, at the same time, reinforcing the sentiment of unity. These are usually achieved by acknowledging a distinct history, culture, mentality – all kinds of unifying factors, which are common to the given nation (or nation-to-be), and which are different than those chosen by others.

The situation is in no way different in Canada – since the very beginnings of the colonisation, the immigrants have created their own way of perceiving the country. As it never occurred to them that they were not the first people to inhabit the land, this identity-creation “naturally” involved disregarding the Natives and dismissing their perception of the place. What the immigrants used instead was confronting Canadian reality with European concepts, adjusting them whenever necessary.

The effect of this is clearly visible throughout Canadian culture, literature in special, up to contemporary times. There are certain characteristic motives, used widely in many

works, easily traceable and identifiable, that go back to the earliest attempts to describe Canadian character. The most popular are: Canada as “the true North, strong and free”, which emphasises the beneficent influence of the severe climate conditions upon both physical and moral health (popularised by R. G. Haliburton, Ch. R. Tuttle, G. Parkin); Canada as an appealing wilderness, as “God’s country”, presenting wild and so far unspoilt nature as the country’s most attractive attribute (J. O. Curwood); the notion of “survival” and enduring as a characteristic feature of all Canadians (M. Atwood); the country seen as an “obstacle”, and the immigrants – as exiles to a dangerous, hostile, predatory country, a monstrous nature (N. Frye); the Canadian “schizophrenia” – an uncertainty about one’s place of belonging, being torn between Britishness and Canadianness (M. Atwood); and finally, Canada’s “garrison mentality” – a country of strict laws, group spirit, where individualism is suppressed (N. Frye). Apart from these motives, which refer to the whole of the country, there are also identities specific to particular regions, and to particular immigrant groups as well.

However, the stereotypical visions of Canada, as well as perceiving the nation as a bilingual and bicultural unity, have been strongly challenged by the advent of postmodernism. As opposed to the embracing of two nations, the British and the French Canadians, the country has come to be seen as a multicultural phenomenon, and so cultures other than English or French have begun to be appreciated. It was especially the rediscovering and re-evaluating of the Native cultures that has undermined the persisting vision of Canadian nature as hostile. Along with the gradual increase of the importance of multiculturalism, the understanding of Canadianness was redefined, and what emerged was, popularised by L. Hutcheon and R. Kroetsch, the idea of Canada as a “post-modern country,” where all the speakers are given voice and it is this plurality of voices that constitutes the nation’s character. But how is this newly conceived identity constructed and does it still serve the

same purposes, namely the distinction from other nations and the unification within the community?

In order to answer this question, let us investigate how identity is constructed and what functions it performs in *The Sweet Hereafter*, a film directed by Atom Egoyan. With a screenplay based on a Russel Banks' novel, it is yet another voice in the polyphony of opinions about what it means to be Canadian— and this definitely in a modern approach, since Egoyan, “as an outsider, [...] became sensitive to the idea of identity as something that is socially constructed – not something that one simply inherits.”¹ Apart from being an elaborate study of the reactions of parents who had lost a child, and of the ways people try to deal with a tragedy, the film can also be read as an insight into the nature of Canadianness. What is more, the plot is set in a small town in British Columbia, and aspects of regional identity are also considerably present in the film. The three main components of Canadian identity the film deals with are: geographical determinism, the mythology of small little towns and garrison mentality, and the British Columbia's distinctiveness from other provinces.

The first of these issues is the problem of geographical determinism and Canada as a northern country. The identification of Canada with the North has been turned through the years from a merely geographical fact to a statement of national importance – a nationalistic “idea that Canada's unique character derived from her northern location, her severe winters and her heritage of ‘northern races’.”² This idea was constructed upon two underlying concepts: first, that the severe northern climate would make a natural selection among the immigrants, of whom only the strongest and hardest will survive; and second, that due to their exceptional physical qualities, which result also in moral health, the northern races are

¹ Katherine Monk, *Weird Sex & Snowshoes and Other Canadian Film Phenomena* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2001), 114

² Carl Berger, “The True North Strong and Free,” in: *Canadian Culture. An Introductory Reader*, ed. Elspeth Cameron (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1997), 84

superior to those of the South. This specific Canadian nationalism was especially flourishing during the Canada First Movement, and, popularised in particular by Robert Grant Haliburton, Charles R. Tuttle and George Parkin, was a specific blend of Darwinism and human geography. From a simple observation that severe climatic conditions render the inhabitants particularly strong, able to endure more, and self-reliant, they induced that northern races are also more healthy and strong when it comes to morality. As Carl Berger puts it, “Canada must be a pre-eminent power, the home of a superior race, the heir of both the historical destiny of the ancient Scandinavians and their spirit of liberty.”³ This rather strange correlation between the North and liberty was based on the case of ancient Rome, destroyed by northmen not because of their barbarian nature, but rather as a result of their abhorrence towards autocracy. Severe northern climate was believed to be conducive to self-government, as opposed to the South, which appeared to be inclined to tyranny. Berger observes that “liberty itself depended upon self-reliance, a rugged independence, instilled by the struggle for existence”⁴ – Canadians were bound to become a dominant race because of their northern place of dwelling. This is how geographical determinism gradually became a racial one, and the binary opposition North – South served to stress Canada’s superiority over the United States.

In *The Sweet Hereafter*, this issue is presented in two aspects. What is preserved, is the idea of Canada as a northern country in simply geographical terms – the film is filled with breathtaking landscapes, forests covered with snow, and mighty mountains. Nature is beautiful, but underneath the beauty lies its second face. Nature is magnificent and splendid, but it is also the Pied Piper that took the children away. It is dangerous, menacing, frightening – it is Nature as a monster.

³ Berger, 87

⁴ Berger, 93

What is changed, however, is the belief in Canadians' racial superiority – although the inhabitants of the town are undoubtedly experienced in dealing with harsh weather conditions and are able to survive the severe winters, not all of them are in perfect health, which was supposed to be the effect of living in the unspoilt, pure, clear environment – the Walkers' son was, according to Dolores, “behind other kids, too nervous to play sports,” and Billy's wife died of cancer, which also should not have happened in a place where the salubrity of the climate was believed to prevent any disease. The town dwellers' non-physical strength is also not that obvious. In the face of the tragedy they do not behave like strong and brave northmen – they do not fight, they do not try to find the guilty of the accident; instead, they fall into “the sweet hereafter”, an apathy after mourning, a feeling that “something terrible has happened, it's taken our children away; it's too late.” They do not actually wish to be helped by anyone. What is also revealed along with Stevens' investigation is that the town is by no means an example of a perfect community, where people devoid of vices live together in perfect cooperation, leading a life that is simple and pure; as Stevens puts it, “things get covered up, people lie,” with time we find out that the inhabitants have their own secrets which they want to keep from revelation; they are also prepared to lie in order to protect the community from what they see as a threat. This is not a dominant race to lead the world and work as an example of a modern, liberal society – if there is strength in the town citizens, it is a strength of passive resistance rather than of brave and manly actions.

What is connected with the portrait of the town as a community is its existence within the mythology of little towns. This typical element of Canadian landscape is usually portrayed in two ways: as a happy, serene, peaceful place, like in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*; or as a place of no possibilities, where people know everything about one another, are envious, as a place of feigned, surface morality. Egoyan shows the town in the film in a more complex

way: thanks to the non-chronological structure of the plot, and to retrospections, we are looking at a town on the verge of a dramatic change. From the scenes before the accident the town emerges as a happy community, where people live quietly, have ambitions and plans for the future, life goes on as it always had and there is no sign of the approaching tragedy. The bus accident changes all that. Those who have lost their children lose also the will to live and the energy to act. The atmosphere is nervous, old grudges are revealed, the communication is blocked – people prefer not to talk to one another, and if they try to, they inevitably end up in an argument. However, as the face of the town changes, as people become withdrawn and keep away from one another (“we used to help each other because this was a community”), they at the same time remain united, although in an entirely different way – this is not a unity around something, it is a unity against; gradually, silently, they join together against any attempt to change anything, to any external intervention – “all of us are citizens of a different town now,” Nicole says, “a place with its own special rules, special laws, a town of people living in the sweet hereafter.” Thus a specific kind of “garrison mentality” emerges. They feel distinct and remote from the “outside” world, and this distinctness allows them to unite and identify more closely with the community; “in many cases, an individual may identify as much with a group sharing a common set of values as with the settlement in which he or she lives.”⁵

Closely connected with this phenomenon is the last issue – the town as the depiction of British Columbia. We can observe certain similarities between the way the image of the town is constructed, and how British Columbia is perceived in Canada and what it says about

⁵ Timothy McTiernan, “Northern Communities and Sustainable Development in Canada’s North,” in: *Communities, Development, and Sustainability across Canada*, eds. John. T. Pierce, Ann Dale (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 93

itself. What is the most typical is the province's "sense of being a nation within a nation,"⁶ a feeling of distinctness and "un-Canadianness". This can be easily related to the change that had happened in the town after the school bus accident. In all the actions performed by the citizens, what is clearly visible is their desire to be left alone in peace, a dislike of anyone's interfering in their business. They are reluctant to Stevens' actions even more after he claims that he knows what is best for them, they gradually refuse to cooperate. As one of the characters puts it, "all of us are citizens of a different town now" – the town has changed as a result of the tragedy, and there is no coming back to what was before. People who have been through one of the philosophical critical situations, and meeting with death is one of them, begin to see the world through different eyes. They cannot communicate with the rest anymore, and they do not wish to, because they are entirely distinct now – like the dreams of Nicole, who is disabled and knows that she will never become a rock star, so the town's future is now utterly altered.

Another aspect of the representation of the town as British Columbia is a desire of the citizens "to become 'masters in their own house (...)."⁷ The inhabitants of the town in the film reject Stevens' help not only because they do not want to do anything – they also want the whole matter to be kept to themselves, they seek privacy in their own hometown. "Privacy from strangers, privacy from kin: privacy to seek our goals, privacy to be ourselves."⁸ It is the first – privacy from strangers – that becomes the most important. Not only do the town inhabitants want to be left alone with their pain and suffering, not only do they want to go through the suffering within the closed circle of their friends and neighbours; in the first

⁶ Miro Cernetig, "The Far Side of the Rockies: Politics and Identity in British Columbia," in: *A Passion for Identity. An Introduction to Canadian Studies*, third edition, eds. David Taras, Beverly Rasporich – University of Calgary (Scarborough, Ontario: International Thomson Publishing Nelson, 1997), 449

⁷ David Mitchell, "What B.C.'s Quiet Revolution is Really About," *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 30, 1996 – a quote after: Miro Cernetig, "The Far Side of the Rockies: Politics and Identity in British Columbia," 459

⁸ Peter Ward, *A History of Domestic Space. Privacy and the Canadian Home* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 160

place, they want to do it in their own manner, without anyone interfering – they want to solve their problem the way they like to, even if this means doing nothing at all. It appears that it is not important what (if anything) is done as long as the town inhabitants are “masters in their own house.”

Let us now come back to the question of the functions identity performs in the post-modern Canadian society on the example of Atom Egoyan’s film – does it still serve to create distinctness from other groups and unity within the community, or are the functions different?

Interestingly enough, it appears that, although the film is a modern one, and although in many respects it opposes to a number of conventional ways of understanding Canadianness, yet it shows identity as such in a rather traditional way. Namely, all the aspects of identity in the film, from marvellous northern landscapes, through the small town community, to the specifically British Columbian sense of being different than the rest of the country, and therefore the desire to be governed in the community’s own way, all these issues do nothing else but stress the group’s being different from other groups, from those in the South, from those living in big cities, from the other parts of the country who want to interfere in the community’s private life. According to the director, “so much of our identity is formed by what we are not, but I think we know we are different. It’s not just different from Americans. It goes deeper than that [...]”⁹ This is the part of identity that is constructed as a negation, a contradiction, a difference – a nation becomes a nation because the people are not the same as those from elsewhere.

However, all these characteristic features of the group which draw a clear dividing line between it and other communities, perform at the same time a function that is, apparently,

⁹ Atom Egoyan’s words quoted in: Katherine Monk, *Weird Sex & Snowshoes and Other Canadian Film Phenomena*, 117

entirely in contradiction to the one of separating and distinguishing from others. Using negativity when referring to the outside, they come to function in the positive once applied to the inside of the community – what divides a group of people from other groups of people simultaneously unites the particular group from within. Its members join around unifying symbols, ideas or beliefs, and so while e.g. the feeling of the “strange un-Canadianness” separates British Columbia from the country, it unites its inhabitants, who adopt the idea that what they have in common is, among other matters, exactly this difference. This phenomenon is very well illustrated in *The Sweet Hereafter* – it is parallel to the way the town inhabitants gradually isolate themselves from Stevens and join together against him in a kind of quiet and passive, but nonetheless stiff, strong and, eventually, effective resistance.

The understanding of Canadianness has undergone an immense change since the first immigrations – some of the original perceptions of Canada have been utterly dismissed (like that of disregarding Native people), while others have been only altered (Canada as a bilingual/bicultural country has started to be seen as a multicultural society), and some prevail in an almost unchanged form, even though they are now approached with a greater deal of scepticism (like the identification of Canada with harsh northern climate and magnificent nature). Still, that which does not change whatever the times and predominant worldview, is the function of identity. However conceived and however constructed, identity remains among the most important issues every human being and every nation must decide on – to know who we are and who we are not is the basis for any further action.

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