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**Mediating the Self:
Employment of Media in *Family Viewing*
and *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing***

Master's Diploma Thesis

Supervisor: doc. PhDr. Tomáš Pospíšil, Dr.

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*I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently,
using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.*

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Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to present, analyze and compare the ways in which two of the most well-known Canadian directors think of media and technology and how they project their visions onto the screen. Canada is an exclusive creative area and the identity of Canadians, or more precisely identities, is formed by many influences and tensions: for example by the vast landscape, harsh climate, sparse population, the presence of a powerful neighbour or multiculturalism. Technology is also claimed to be one of the most important forces in this process and its importance is manifested by many media thinkers of Canadian origin or by the themes of various cultural works of art or products, including movies.

Media and technology have become a prominent part of many areas of human life and the driving force of industrial, economical and cultural development. Their impact on everyday lives of each of us is, no doubt, immense. Its influence has been growing steadily since the beginning of the 20th century up till now: today it is a part of our everyday life, it is considered as something ordinary, usual, almost indigenous. But thirty or even twenty years ago the situation was different—people mostly did not know what to expect from radical changes brought about by the technological development and they had to cope with it. The need to respond to the changing situation within society got soon reflected in all spheres of human life, most visibly in science and arts. Artists not only started to use the new technologies in the process of creation of their works, but they also employed new media as thematic means in their works. With their roots in experimental kinds of art, these tendencies were slowly adopted by mainstream branches of art, including cinema whose voice is important for reflection of the society's thinking and importantly also for forming and re-forming of this thinking.

For the purposes of my thesis I have chosen two well-known Canadian directors who touch upon the theme of technology in their movies: Atom Egoyan and Patricia Rozema. Each of these filmmakers made more films which address the theme of media and technology but there is not enough place to include them all. I have chosen to analyze one movie by each in which media have a prominent role: *Family Viewing* (1987) by Atom Egoyan and *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987) by Patricia Rozema. I believe that close analyses of the two movies can provide a valuable contribution to the research of the connections between technology and the Canadian mind. Each of the directors operates in various genres and employs different means of expression and cinematic techniques, providing thus a great opportunity for examination of the different modes of representation describing the same or similar concepts. Therefore, the analyses and comparison of movies made by the two directors can reveal at least a part of the mosaic of the Canadian perspective on the issue of technology. With this aim in mind, the thesis is not trying to provide any general views. On the contrary, it seeks to show what questions related to technologies Canadian directors address, if any of them attempts to answer them in some way and what relevance their positions and perspective have in the context of the Canadian culture.

One of the main directorial voices speaking about technology will not be given place in this thesis—the one of David Cronenberg. Since his works have raised an exhaustive and occasionally harsh debates among cultural and film critics, media theoreticians and many others involved in film or media studies, there is an enormous quantity of literature covering his works and ideas and any other contribution devoted to him seems to be a mere drop in the ocean. Moreover, many critics do not consider Cronenberg to represent a Canadian voice sufficiently and prefer to see him rather as an international director.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter covers the context of media and technologies and includes a brief sketch of their history, general introduction to the theories of new media and some questions and problems which various media theories deal with. The overview of these topics is by no means exhaustive and represents an attempt to familiarize the readers with the issues related to the questions raised by technologies in the modern world. The chapter concludes with several notes on the uniqueness of Canadian cultural context with regards to its forming influences, its relations and ties to technology, and it also touches upon the issue of importance of technology for the formation of Canadian identity.

Chapters two and three, respectively, analyze and compare the representation of media in the films of the two above mentioned directors: namely, in Egoyan's *Family Viewing* (1987) and Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987). Both chapters introduce the filmmakers and shortly describe their lives and directorial careers. Then, they proceed to introduce the movies and summarize their success and critical reception. After a brief synopsis, the analyses of the movies follow. They especially concentrate on the scenes which deal with issues related to media and address the relationship of technology to the self, to power and to time and space. Does technology unify or rather divide? How is it perceived by the characters involved, how do individual characters relate to them and what meaning does their use imply? These are the most important question I will try to answer.

The fourth chapter, which is the concluding part of the thesis, provide the necessary link between the two previous chapters. Not only that it compares the two films to each other, it also summarizes the various roles of media in both movies, setting them into a wider context of Canadian society and the theoretical discourse related to media. It concentrates on the search for common themes and ideas presented in the two

films which reflect some of the media theories, especially those that have arisen from the Canadian context. Apart from similarities, it also addresses the differences in thematic focus, subthemes and foregrounding and backgrounding of various themes which are found in the two movies and relate to technology. Finally, it sets the two movies into the context of Canadian culture and thinking.

1. Technology: Our Second Self

*[It] is a distinctively modern fate to **live** technology as a kind of second biology which, whether in city architecture, chemically processed foods, sound production or the zooming lens of the camera eye, defines and limits the human condition.*

Arthur Kroker

Never before have had media and technologies influenced our lives as they do today and never before have they been so powerful and omnipresent. The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the pioneers of this change, early communication technologies like the telephones or simple fax machines, and also notably in the arts photography and cinema, which were celebrated by Walter Benjamin for their democratizing potential. However, they were still far from the state-of-the-art technologies we know today—computers, virtual reality or biotechnologies. The immense change of media environment brought, among other things, the establishment of a new branch of study, the so-called New Media Theory and New Media Departments are being established at universities and other cultural institutions all over the world and the theoretical discussions over media and other communication theories are still intensive. The theoreticians (and not only those who specialize in new media theories) look into many aspects of media and communication, from the ideological point of view to industrial uses; they also try to re-assess the positions of the older generation of cultural and media critics (like Adorno or McLuhan) and set them to the context of rapidly changing media environment.

The following subchapters will cover a brief sketch of history of media and technologies in the twentieth and twenty-first century, general introduction to the theories of new media and technologies and the most important questions and problems

that various theories deal with. The overview of these topics is by no means exhausting and represents rather an attempt to familiarize the readers with the topics related to the questions raised by technologies in the modern world and thus prepare them for the following chapters which will address these topics in further detail. This chapter will conclude with the discussion of the theme of technologies and media within the Canadian context and its presumed influence on the formation of Canadian identity.

1.1 New vs. Old Age of Media: What has changed?

Before any further investigation of the history of media, one should first consider the term “media” itself. In the established sense, the term media “usually refers to ‘communication media’ and the institutions and organizations in which people work (the press, cinema, broadcasting, publishing, and so on) and the cultural and material products of those institutions (the forms and genres of news, road movies, soap operas which take the material forms of newspapers, paperback books, films, tapes, discs)” (Thompson qtd. in Lister 9-10). The reality of media nowadays, roughly since the second half of the 20th century, is generally thought to be different from the reality of the older, broadcast, media—in fact, we nowadays tend to regard cinema, television and photograph as the “old media” because “the image industries develop and offer new generations of media and ever-shorter intervals, with the modern and postmodern periods already in the rearview mirror” (Grau 9). Based on this assumption, the theoreticians generally divide the media age (roughly the 20th century) into two epochs: the First and the Second Media Ages, the latter also called the Age of the New Media.

The history of the older generation of media (“old media”) started to be written in the first half of the 19th century with the invention of *daguerreotype* which was later superseded by photography. The end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries

then witnessed a great boom of technological inventions from chronophotography, cinematograph and cinema, which expressed artists' fascination with capturing the time and human body, to various mechanical and electrical tabulators and calculators, media allowing the storage of images, sounds or texts (Manovich 23).

The true media age as we understand it today—the age of new media and new technologies (like computers, Internet, digital media or virtual reality)—began innocently and quietly in the early 1960's when the first computer users, the hackers, began to carry out their experiments. With the “information wants to be free” ideology in mind they developed and hacked the first mainframe computers in the laboratories of Massachusetts Institute of Technology from where the ideas and technological innovations have been slowly but steadily spreading to all areas of the human life, from work field to art. Interestingly enough, the new technologies were first used and the principles surrounding them were formulated in a culture that was in many ways oppositional to the mainstream culture (Lister 197).

Various theoreticians understand the common defining characteristics of the new media as opposed to the old media slightly differently. The most well-known principles were defined by Lev Manovich (27-48) who summarized them into five concepts: numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability and transcoding,¹ or by Martin Lister who used the principles of digitality, interactivity, hypertextuality, dispersal and virtuality. Undoubtedly, the influence of the new media (and their characteristics) changed radically and profoundly the whole society and culture. For

¹ Lev Manovich, the theoretician of the early Second Media Age, summarized the common characteristics of new media but these should not to be taken as absolute laws but rather as general tendencies: 1) numerical representation: all media objects are composed of digital code; 2) modularity: new media have fractal structure (are represented as collections of discrete samples – pixels, polygons, scripts); 3) automation: this characteristics is the result of the two preceding ones, operations involved in media creation, manipulation and access are automated; 4) variability: new media object is not fixed and can exist in potentially infinite versions; 5) (cultural) transcoding: the culture and computer layers influence each other, they are being composited together and human and computer meanings blend together (Manovich 27-48).

example, they are being thought of as the vehicle enhancing individualism and creativity rather than mass culture and passivity, or are being celebrated for their democratizing and decentralizing potential and immense possibilities they offer (Holmes 9).

Is the fuss about the newness of the “new” media justified or is their influence over-estimated too much? The discussion over the media being determining or determined has been lengthy and heated, and many scholars and theoreticians (not only from the field of media studies) joined it. Some of them, mostly those of the beginning of the new media age, praised the new media and attributed an immense power and influence to them: even considered them to be the agents of cultural development. Such was the position of well-known technological determinists like Marshall McLuhan, Harold Innis, William Ogburn, Sigfried Giedion or Leslie White (Chandler, “Technological”).

Nowadays the discussion has progressed and the contemporary theoreticians re-evaluate the opinions of previous generations. They argue that, in many respects, the old media augured and inspired the developments of digital technologies and they see rather continuity than a radical brake between the first and second media ages: “[The] second media age thesis does not acknowledge just how much interactive CITs share some of the dynamics of broadcast that they have supposedly transcended, and, what is more, the degree to which they are dependent on and parasitic of broadcast” (Holmes 12). For example Lev Manovich argues that both operate with similar logics: “A hundred years after cinema’s birth, cinematic ways of seeing the world of structuring time, of narrating a story, of linking one experience to the next, have become the basic means by which computer users access and interact with all cultural data. In this respect, the computer fulfils the promise of cinema as a visual Esperanto [...]” (Manovich 78-79). Similarly,

Ron Burnett in his essay “From Photography to Immography” takes into account “clear links between performance, rituals, theatre, the circus, painting, and what we are describing as immersive, virtual experiences [...]” (129). With the concept of *remediation*² and the argument similar to that of Mark Poster that one “needs to keep in mind the enormous variability of the technology rather than assume its determining powers,” (Poster: “Postmodern Virtualities”) the course of discussion on media changed its direction and focused on deeper and more essential problems, turning the difference between the “new” and “old” into a rather superfluous concept.

² Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000) argue that *remediation* (representation of one medium in another) is the defining characteristics of all new media. New media therefore always borrow some characteristics from their predecessors (*remediate* them).

1.2 Let's Talk Technology

Media and technologies fill our everyday lives and routines, they are the tools we work with everyday, things we enjoy or hate. If one wants to understand their role in the society and their meaning for an individual, one needs to address the mutual influence of media and the things or concepts they interact with. These various interactions are addressed by many fields of the human activity—the art, philosophy, literature, cinema or theories of cybeculture. It is the cybercultural theories especially that provide one of the widest ranges of perspectives on the media and technologies because the term “cyberculture” itself is very broad and includes the art, philosophy, cinema and other fields in itself and is also closely connected with our everyday lives: “When we read our electronic mail or send postings to an electronic bulletin board or make an airline reservation over a computer network, we are in cyberspace” (Turkle 9), and therefore participate in cyberculture. Even if the term “cyberculture” is primarily used to designate both the historical and current sub-cultures of hackers, literary cyberpunk, groups of the computer users or the form of a future society transformed by state-of-the-art ICTs, it also denotes the historical and current reflection on and investigations in the field of new media and technology (Macek 2). The most important cybercultural themes will therefore serve as examples of the questions and problems arising with technologies and will illustrate the profound change of the world brought about by the blurring of boundaries and the dichotomic categories we used for defining the world.

Human Body and Self vs. Technology

Men, or more precisely the human body, provide the immediate responses to technology and therefore, the relation of the body and self to technology is one of the most important themes of discussions. Major theoretical discussions evolve around people incorporating technologies into their bodies (in the form of artificial organs, microchips, xenotransplantation etc.) or using them, in McLuhanian sense, as extensions of their own senses and organs. As a result, people in a way become cyborgs—the fusions of the flesh and technology that decreases the importance of biology and genetics in the formation of human body. The human/machine dualism is an interesting theme but there are some others that are associated with it, for example the production and control of new information-generated environments or questions about the meaning of the terms like “human”, “body” or “life” as these are being radically transformed. The oppositional view questions the possibility of being reduced either to biological or technological bases (Lister 91).

When considered from the point of view of the immaterial self, we get to the questions concerning the changing and multiplying of one’s identity in modern world because the traditional “self” — stable and fixed—has been decentred and fragmented (Bell 114). As Lev Manovich argues: “interactive media ask us to identify with someone else’s mental structure” (Manovich 61) and therefore, identity and its new structuring brought about by those media, the way we experience ourselves and our place in the modern world are dramatically altered and have to be reconsidered.

The most common themes that are connected with identity include debates over gender, sexuality, race, and class and concern especially the visibility or invisibility of identity online, the modes of self-presentation, issues of ‘otherness’ and ‘passing’, and questions of the politics of particular online identity-strategies (Bell 135). These

discussions try to analyze how various previously marginalized groups of people (women, queer people or various ethnic groups) access, use and relate to technologies. They attempt to discuss whether these groups are excluded from virtual spaces or dominate there or whether these marginalized identities matter at all in cyberspace. Another widely covered theme concern the possibilities of identity play and subsequent rewriting of identities or gender switching.

Nature & Culture vs. Technology

From the material point of view there also arises a question of whether technology belongs to culture (is artificial) or nature (is natural) or whether technology unsettles the distinction between natural and artificial completely (Lister 91). Studying technology in the context of culture entails opening question whether it is isolable from its physical environment and the forces therein. Moreover, going to the root of the problem we also need to re-define what “culture” and “nature” mean in modern world (Lister 91).

Authenticity vs. Technology

With the developments of virtual reality, virtual worlds of the Internet and other immersive environments, the reality and authenticity of experience are questioned.

The first position within this theme builds on the ideas of Jean Baudrillard and is rather pessimistic claiming that authenticity is in crisis because of the doubtfulness of technologically mediated communication and experience. We are unable to differentiate between reality and mediation (or simulation) and are therefore vulnerable to manipulation. “Virtual” here thus means false, artificial and unreal (Macek 17).

The other broad position is more optimistic stressing the creativity rather than the passivity and the possibility to express oneself freely in virtual cyberspaces. It liberates us because we leave the body in reality and enjoy our new unrestricted identities (Macek 17).

There are many other areas that are covered by intensive discussions in connection with the media and technologies in modern world. I have shown that the questions coming with the developments and further spread of media and technologies are extremely complex and in many ways subjective and, as such, do not have easy answers. In chapters that follow, I will try to illustrate and analyze the views of some of the Canadian filmmakers on these issues but first, I need to set the discussion about technologies and media into the Canadian context.

1.3 Technology in the Context of Canada

Much has been written about technology with respect to Canada because it is seen as one of the most important themes weaving through the Canadian discourse. One of the reasons (or rather the result?) is the fact that many well-known and respected theoreticians and thinkers in the field of media and technologies (even though many of them do not limit themselves to this branch of study exclusively) are native Canadians: Graham Spry, Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, George Grant, Gertrude Robinson or Irene Spry.

Many sources summarize other possible reasons for the prominence of technology within the Canadian discourse, for example the vastness of the Canadian landscape with sparse population and inhospitable climate and the consequent need to overcome great distances in order to keep in touch with people living in the various

parts of the country, to maintain Canadian national unity and sovereignty by the means of communication technologies. Canada is, in this respect, the country existing “by reason of communication” (Grierson qtd. in Babe 25) and therefore technologies stand at the very core of Canadian identity. On the contrary, Robert E. Babe talks about the possibly “undue emphasis” on landscape in the context of Canada and especially the formation of Canadian identity and inclines rather to the opinion of Herschel Hardin who maintained that “the landscape provides but a superficial understanding of the Canadian identity, and to focus exclusively or intensively on that is sheer ‘escapist fantasy’” (Fry qtd. in Babe 25). Babe thus needs to look for concepts defining Canadianness and Canadian identity elsewhere. However, it can be argued that people have always been largely defined by landscape they lived in; it determined and limited natural resources and consequently had the immediate influence on human life. Even though landscape may not be the only defining characteristic, it is certainly one of the most important.

Another possible reason for prominence of technologies is also often seen in the struggle of the country with its powerful and technologically advanced neighbour, the United States, which has always been in the centre of technological progress. Canada, therefore, is seen to be catching up with it and pressed to prove its technological abilities. Similar argument was articulated by Arthur Kroker, Concordia University professor and famous thinker of the contemporary Canada. He sees the reason for such a prominence of technology in the history of Canada as the country which emerged between the New World of America and the past of European culture, ascribing “the mind of in-between” to Canadians: the Canadian mind is that of *in-between*—a “restless oscillation between the pragmatic will to live at all costs of the Americans and a searing lament for that which has been suppressed by the modern, technological order”

(Kroker 7). Then, he continues using the examples from cinema and music or literature and philosophy and concludes by saying that “a sustained and intensive reflection on the meaning of the technological experience is the Canadian discourse” (Kroker 12). On the other hand, Robert E. Babe claims that Canadian identity needs to be viewed rather in terms of dialectic logic which means “both a mode of understanding and a way of describing human existence in the context of conflicting pressures” (Babe 28), in which conflict, tension and opposition are the starting points of any discussion. He also develops the arguments of Kroker and claims that Grant, McLuhan and Innis were all dialectical thinkers (Babe 27). However, this need not necessarily deny the previously mentioned arguments. Rather, the discussions about technology and media in terms of dialectics can even expand the field of study and raise new and interesting questions.

Once again one can see that discussion about the prominence of technologies within the Canadian context is a complex one, influenced by various thoughts and tensions. Even though technology need not necessarily stand at the core of Canadian identity and thinking as argued by some of the above-mentioned authors, it undoubtedly is an essential part of Canadian thinking and cultural context because the theme of technologies and media is a prominent one and is being widely addressed by both the Canadian as well as foreign critics. The question of Canadian identity as such and the role technologies play in its formation is also very complex and without doubt topical, but it is not going to be directly and primarily dealt with in this thesis because I will work only with views of several directors as represented in their movies which cannot be taken as representative of the whole nation. Rather, I will try to analyze what some of the Canadian movies, as essential cultural artefacts, say about technologies and human relationship to them, what visions they represent and what questions they raise or attempt to answer especially with respect to the Canadian context.

2. Atom Egoyan: *Family Viewing*

Atom Egoyan is one of the most famous and critically acclaimed filmmakers not only on the Canadian but also on the international scene. He is often hailed as “brilliantly innovative” (Egoyan, “Family Romances”). On the other hand, he is also occasionally damned as “a purveyor of arid cinematic parables” (Egoyan, “Family Romances”): his critics sometimes argue that his movies are dispassionate and have a certain amount of “coldness” (Russel 321) and for some he has even gained reputation as “the world’s most depressing filmmaker” (Kent, “Body”). His supporters like Sherry Vint contradict such a claim by arguing that Egoyan conveys “a deep emotion” (Vint 60). Due to the complexity of Egoyan’s oeuvre as well as the discussions surrounding it, it is therefore necessary to briefly sketch Egoyan’s family background and his filmography to be able to better understand the analysis of the selected feature *Family Viewing*.

2.1 Introducing Atom Egoyan and his work

Atom Egoyan was born in 1960 in Cairo, Egypt. His parents, both of Armenian origin, ran a furniture shop. When Atom was three years old, the family moved to Victoria, British Columbia. They changed the last name to Egoyan and opened a new furniture store in Canada (“Atom Egoyan – Biography”). Egoyan moved to Toronto at the age of 18 where he studied international relations and classical guitar at the University of Toronto. There he began to explore the art and cinema, and started making his own films (“Atom Egoyan: Director”).

His major breakthrough came when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation decided to broadcast his fourth short film *Open House* (1982) which gained the young

filmmaker nationwide recognition (“Atom Egoyan Bio”). Two years after his debut on the Canadian TV screens, the first Egoyan’s feature *Next of Kin* followed.

During his prolific career Egoyan made several short films, twelve independent features, six television films (e.g. *Krapps’s Last Tape* (2000) and *Sarabande* (1997)) and also some series’ episodes (e.g. *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *The Twilight Zone*, both in 1985).

Feature films

Egoyan’s movies have earned him critical recognition world-wide. In addition to innumerable Genies, Geminis, and jury and critics’ prizes, he has received recognitions ranging from the nomination of *Exotica* (1994) for the Adult Video Award for the Best Alternative Video to the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures award for the “Special Recognition of Films that Reflect the Freedom of Expression” and the Political Film Society of Hollywood’s award for Best Film on Human Rights for *Ararat* in 2002 (Tschofen and Burwell 6).

Egoyan’s feature films are often divided into two periods. The ten-year period of the “Early Egoyan” begins with *Next of Kin* in 1984 through *Family Viewing* (1987), *Speaking Parts* (1989), *The Adjuster* (1991), *Calendar* (1993) to *Exotica* (1994) which is considered to mark a new direction which was fulfilled with his next feature *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997). All the early movies call attention to the omnipresence of media in the contemporary North American and in particular Canadian society (Shary, “Video” 2), offer great studies in the functioning of family and memory, especially focusing on questions of how we are influenced by images or how memory has changed after the rise and spread of visual technology, particularly motion picture, due to its ability to record our experience (Egoyan, “Family Romances”). These movies rely on

highly “staged” and artificial settings and draw attention to various “props”, including photographs, television and video screens, audio recorders, telephones and various types of camera (Tschofen and Burwell 7). They are often labelled as “voyeuristic”—focused on the desire to spy, the need to see³—and are also considered ‘cold’ by some critics and viewers. The reason for this coldness may be seen, as Egoyan himself explained, in the fact that they do not provide the usual pattern of identification with the main hero (Egoyan, “Family Romances”). The usual pattern can be explained in terms of the kind of visual representation which Bolter and Grusin call “transparent immediacy”.

Transparent immediacy is the strategy of the media (or the operators using them) by which they try to convince the audiences (or players) that the technological apparatus is transparent, i.e. it does not exist. The aim of both the media and their operators/programmers/creators is to disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing or persons represented (e.g. the characters of a movie or game).⁴

Another common feature of Egoyan’s early movies is that they make the viewers aware of their position as viewers (Egoyan, “Family Romances”), and they also demand a certain engagement from the viewer—a strategy that Egoyan borrowed from other arts: theatre (especially theatre of the absurd), opera and installation art (Tschofen and Burwell 7).

The midpoint in Egoyan’s career came with *Exotica* (1994) when the director ceased making absurdist films and turned his attention to more classically narrative and character-focussed films. He has still retained some of the themes and techniques from the early period (distanciation, estrangement, artificiality and other) but their use is not so much theatrical (Tschofen and Burwell 7). Through previously mentioned *Exotica*

³ This aspect of Egoyan’s cinematography is discussed for example in Harcourt, “Imaginary Images”; Kent, “Body”; or Chappel, “Alain Resnais”.

⁴ The best example of transparent immediacy is virtual reality but it is also used by painters and is reflected in their canvases.

(1994), *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), *Felicia's Journey* (1999), *Ararat* (2002), *Where the Truth Lies* (2005), *Adoration* (2008) to the most recent *Chloe* (2009), these films are thought to be more easily accessible in terms of the emotional engagement of viewers.

This thesis is going to address one of the early movies which deal with the theme of technology in detail and offer deep and complex study of relationships between people, mostly family members, in the world framed and dominated by technologies. Each of the five early films deserves to be included in this thesis but unfortunately there is no space for it because the aim of the thesis is to compare Egoyan's *Family Viewing* (1987) with Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987) with regards to the role of media and technology.

2.2 Egoyan's *Family Viewing*: Sex, Lies and Videotape

The title of this subchapter was chosen because it is “Sex, Lies and Videotape” that characterize Egoyan's early films, including *Family Viewing*, precisely. As discussed above, Egoyan's early movies have similar characteristics—preoccupation with themes like family, technology, trauma, erasure, violation, and forgetting. They also had limited budget and similar tone, editing pace and acting style. Moreover, in virtually all of his films, including *Family Viewing*, Egoyan managed to retain a complete control: he wrote, directed, produced and edited them. Another typical feature of Egoyan's cinematography is the fact that he surrounds himself with regular collaborators who cooperate on most of his films. For all, let's name at least his wife Arsinée Khanjian, who played in almost all his movies, including all the early ones.

Family Viewing is the story of “mistaken and found identities,” observing the “breakdown and restoration of a dislocated family. Darkly humorous and unpredictable,

Family Viewing is a complex journey into a world of brutality and sentiment” (“Family Viewing”).

The movie budgeted at \$160,000 and was financed with private money and state-funded grants (Taubin 28). Egoyan did not aspire for a bigger budget because of the formal considerations. Therefore, even though he finally decided to ask Telefilm and Ontario Film Development Corporation for money, he had to marginalize himself and hired only limited crew in order to ensure a complete control over the production (Egoyan, “Interview with Burnett”).

Family Viewing received a glowing response: it was awarded the “Best Canadian Feature Film” at the Toronto International Film Festival and received eight Genie Awards’ nominations. Some negative reactions also appeared, like that of Adam Barker who argued that Van’s “crucial role increasingly makes the film look like a piece of adolescent wish-fulfilment, culminating in his mothers’ reappearance from nowhere at the end” and that “[with] so many boundaries of so many genres, it is not surprising that it is often confused and unsatisfactory” (300). Despite this and several other negative responses, it can be argued that *Family Viewing* was highly successful with film critics who considered Egoyan “well worth watching in the future” because *Family Viewing* develops “real style and real feeling” (Maslin, “Family Viewing”).

2.3 Synopsis

Family Viewing centres on the life of the members of a family. Van is a young man in his late teens, living with his father Stan and step-mother Sandra who occasionally tries to seduce him. Van spends a lot of time with his grand-mother Armen, whom Stan placed in a nursing home so as he could forget about the past and his wife. Armen provides Van with what Stan is afraid of so much—with the access to

Van's childhood, his Armenian roots and above all to his mother who left the family many years ago for a reason that is only alluded to later in the movie. In the old people's home, Van meets Aline, a telephone-sex operator, who comes to visit her mother there. Gradually they become friends but at this moment Van does not know yet that Stan is one of Aline's regular customers.

Stan, the head of the family, is a video equipment salesman and his profession influences his family life profoundly—screens fill the flat the family lives in. Stan's passion is especially connected to video: he likes to record sexual adventures of himself and Sandra over the home video tapes from Van's childhood.

Soon after Van fails in persuading his father to take Armen home, he finds out that Stan erases the tapes from his youth. At this moment Van takes his life into his own hands: he grows angry and secretly takes the tapes away from his father's bedroom. He also decides to help Armen out of the old people's home where she is unhappy.

To accomplish his plans Van takes advantage of the first opportunity and when Aline's mother kills herself with the overdose of pills, Van switches the identity of his grandmother and Aline's mother thus fooling the people around into thinking that it was his grandmother who died. With the help of Aline, who was at first shocked by what happened, Van manages to take his grandmother out of the nursing home and Aline offers him to keep her in her own flat where Van joins them. However, Stan soon begins to suspect that Van took Armen somewhere and hires a private detective to spy after the young couple. Van needs to move Armen into a vacant wing of the hotel where he works. Stan tracks them down but in the meantime Van arranges to take Armen away in an ambulance. The movie closes with a happy family re-union: Van and Aline come to visit his long-lost mother and beloved grandmother into a homeless shelter. In the meantime, Stan in a frantic pursuit after his son collapses in the hotel room.

2.4 *Family Viewing: Let's Have a Look ... on the Viewer*

Family Viewing's distinctness lies first and foremost in the use (or abuse) of various audio and visual media technologies—tape and video recorders, screens and cameras. The plot is non-linear and almost fragmented, which has the effect of heightening the viewers' attention and involvement: they are thrown into the middle of a story not knowing where they are and at least for the first fifteen minutes wondering what is happening around them before they manage to make it at least partly clear. Egoyan thus forces the viewers "to approach his films like detectives, piercing the narrative from broken fragments" (Chappell, "Alain Resnais").

The necessity of being an active and observant viewer is stressed from the first to the last scene of *Family Viewing*. The opening scenes of the movie enclose the viewer in a very limited space behind the camera that overlooks the scene and their view is partly blocked by two racks with trays. They are able to see only some fragments of the furniture in the room in front of them and the bottom of a television placed in its right upper corner. The scene is made complete by a voice presumably coming from the TV, speaking calmly and mildly. A young man, whom one later identifies as Van, appears in front of them but he only looks around, doing nothing at all. Here for the first time in the story, the viewers are made aware of their viewing and of the distance between themselves and the characters in the story. The use of the screen in these opening scenes augurs the tone and mood of the whole film: Egoyan reminds the viewers of the artifice of the movie and thus invites them to "restage" their own relation to what they see and forces them to "give up the comfortable illusion of straightforward relation to reality" (Tschofen and Burwell 23).

The omnipresence of the screen is then stressed again immediately after the first scenes of the film. The viewers are placed in a position of a TV set in the upper corner of another room occupied by several elderly women. Van comes directly beneath the TV and looks into the camera as if studying it, as if suspecting someone or something is hidden there. He then starts switching channels on the TV, presumably looking for something interesting to watch together with his grandmother. At this moment the spectators are freed from the TV box and placed in front of it, thus watching the TV screen within cinema (or another television) screen. This use of the double screen makes the viewers aware that the image is a construct (Egoyan, “Family Romances”). More importantly, however, Egoyan’s strategy embodies what Bolter and Grusin call “hypermediacy”—a style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium—strategy that can be oppositional to the “transparent immediacy” which is typical of conventional cinema:

In the logic of hypermediacy, the artist (or multimedia programmer or web designer) strives to make the viewer acknowledge the medium as a medium and to delight in that acknowledgement. She does so by multiplying spaces and media and by repeatedly redefining the visual and conceptual relationships among mediated spaces—relationships that may range from simple juxtaposition to complete absorption. (42)

Bolter and Grusin, the theoreticians of new media, thus provide a useful guide for interpretation of Egoyan’s work. In their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, they claim that all new media strive for immediacy but although each medium promises to reform its predecessors by providing a more authentic experience (i.e. remediation), the promise inevitably leads one to become aware of the new medium as a medium. Even the most transparent form of media—virtual reality—remediates other technologies and especially film, its subjective style and point of view. Thus, immediacy leads to hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin 17). “Hypermediacy” does not leave the viewers forget about the medium but rather reminds them of its presence

(sometimes subtly and sometimes obviously) and consequently also of their desire for immediacy (Bolter and Grusin 34).⁵ Therefore, while conventional cinema (e.g. classical Hollywood cinema) tries to evoke the idea of immediacy by a unified visual space that strives for transparent immediacy, Egoyan employs, in line with the logic of hypermediacy, a heterogeneous space, in which “representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather as “windowed” itself—with windows that open on to other representation or other media” (Bolter and Grusin 37).

Egoyan sets the interplay of various technologies and media within the context of a family. While family is usually understood as the basic unit of society, a unit that is stable and endures together despite the pitfalls of life, Egoyan’s family does not fulfil this unproblematic pattern: it is incomplete, disorganized and without a deeper mutual interest of individual members in each other. Home is not, therefore, the place of safety and sanctuary. Due to the omnipresence of various screens it is rather depicted as a “constructed and artificial place” (Baronian 148).

As Egoyan himself acknowledged in an interview with Ron Burnett, the characters of *Family Viewing* function as archetypes: “[the] whole film is about people being convinced that they can reduce themselves to their archetypes” thus simplifying themselves from complex human beings to something schematic and trivial. As Egoyan further explained, this process is possible when people allow technology to trivialize themselves.⁶

⁵ Transparent immediacy and hypermediacy are two strategies of remediation which Bolter and Grusin define as “the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms” (273). They thus reflect McLuhan’s claim from *Understanding Media* (1964) that the content of any medium is always another medium.

⁶ *Family Viewing* is not the only movie which employs this strategy, similar treatment of characters can, for example, be found also in *Calendar* (1993) where the characters even do not have any names and need to be called by their functions: photographer, driver or wife.

The family in *Family Viewing* is dominated by a strongly patriarchal Father figure of Stan who exercises substantial amount of control over other family members: he tries to control the life of his son (by forcing him to forget about his Armenian part of self and erasing his childhood memories from videotapes), keeps his mother-in-law in a nursing home and controls also his lover Sandra in many areas of her life, including the sexual one. Stan is presented as an indifferent character who believes to be a much more simple person than he in fact is (when talking about his lover he implicitly acknowledges this fact by saying: “I... appreciate her simplicity. I’m tired of complications”) and is not able to deal with his own complexity (Egoyan, “Interview with Burnett”). The mother figure is missing in the story but her presence is indirectly mediated through video footage from Van’s youth. Father’s lover Sandra is a submissive woman who endures his lover’s sexual abasement and probably as a part of her rebellion against her dominant lover she tries to seduce her stepson who seems to be innocent and easily manipulated (at least at the beginning of the movie). The Son figure of Van is at the beginning quite submissive, he even overtakes some of his fathers’ habits (like his obsession with video) but as the plot develops he undergoes a personal transformation and becomes an independent adult with a mind of his own, thus releasing himself from the influence of his father and establishing his own identity.

As the result of the portrayal of the characters in *Family Viewing*, it may be quite difficult for the viewer to find a way how to identify with them. The identification process is then made even more difficult due to the dialogues which, as Peter Harcourt suggests, are “intentionally flat, delivered in a deadpan way”—inspired by the theatre of the absurd. The characters speak in “a series of absurdist statements that enact a dimension of alienation” (Harcourt, “Imaginary Images”). The following conversation between Van and Stan is delivered coldly and thus only enhance their alienation:

Van: Where's Sandra?
Stan: She's sleeping.
Van: So early?
Stan: She hasn't been feeling well.
Van: What do you mean?
Stan: She's been depressed.
Van: About what?
Stan: I don't know.
Van: Haven't you talked with her about it?
Stan: If she had something to tell me, she would.

Similar dialogues used throughout the whole film cause the viewers to question their own relationship to the characters. Egoyan explained his aim by saying that “[rather] than inviting the viewer to lose himself in the screen presence, the actor asks the viewer to question what it is about the character he’s supposed to identify with. In this way a more profound relationship can be established” (Egoyan qtd. in Harcourt, “Imaginary Images”). This kind of dialogue is not typical of *Family Viewing* exclusively, but can be found in most of Egoyan’s early movies. When commenting on *Speaking Parts* (1989) and *The Adjuster* (1991), the director admitted that “[there’s] not really any invitation to identify with any of the characters. As a matter of fact, you’re always very aware of the fact that you’re watching them, and that becomes what those experiences are about” (Egoyan, “Family Romances”). The following part of the thesis will develop the discussion of the viewing experience in detail.

As suggested by the title of the movie, apart from the family, “viewing” also plays a crucial role. In her famous essay, Laura Mulvey argued that Hollywood film enacts that way of looking associated with the male gaze because both the camera work and narrative structure cause the viewers to identify with the (usually) male main character. Looking is thus, according to Mulvey, one of the sources of pleasure—the so called *scopophilic* pleasure arising from “using another person as an object of sexual simulation through sight” (Mulvey 836-7). She concludes her paper by stating that:

The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favourite cinematic form—illusionistic narrative film. [...] [It] is the place of the look that defines cinema, the possibility of varying it and exposing it. This is what makes cinema quite different in its voyeuristic potential from, say, strip-tease, theatre, shows, etc. Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself. [...] It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged. (Mulvey 843)

The pleasure of the “male gaze” of which Mulvey speaks seems to be what Bolter and Grusin call the desire for transparent immediacy that may then become a male desire to possess the female that is characteristic of the Hollywood cinema. However, as described at the beginning of this subchapter transparent immediacy is not the only way of achieving immediacy and it is rather the opposite approach of hypermediacy that characterizes Egoyan's work:

In such cases, we do not look through the medium in linear perspective; rather, we look at the medium or at a multiplicity of media that may appear in windows on a computer screen or in the fragmented elements of a collage or a photomontage. We do not gaze; rather, we glance here and there at the various manifestations of the media. This immediacy is not based on a desire to control and appropriate the female form, or any form, and may not be univocally gendered. (Bolter and Grusin 81)

By the use of the fragmented narrative structure (“a collage or a photomontage”), Egoyan forces the spectators to piece the various elements together from a multiplicity of clues: settings, characters or props (especially the media: television and video screen, surveillance cameras, etc.). *Family Viewing* thus cannot be analysed in terms of the male gaze as defined by Mulvey. Instead of acquiring the possessive gaze, the viewers need to “glance here and there,” and put individual pieces of the story together (Bryson qtd. in Bolter and Grusin 54). Egoyan thus makes them aware of the process rather than just the product—therefore, both the process of creation and the process of viewing play an important role.

This may be the reason why some reviewers criticized the movie. As Egoyan explained, the viewers “have to be always aware of their position and their relationship to these images” (Egoyan, “Family Romances”). Timothy Shary develops this idea further by arguing that Egoyan’s techniques, such as shifting the visual time frames of video images, relating them to filmic contexts and thus changing their meaning, portraying spectators as “explorers of a visual landscape” (thus questioning the “truth” of what one sees), and by cutting, distorting images or slow and fast motion, ultimately force the audiences to observe their viewing process and make the movie highly self-reflexive. By the instant stressing of the filming techniques the spectators are finally made to acknowledge and examine not only their viewing, but also its artificiality in comparison with “real life” (“Video” 27-28).

Egoyan’s *Family Viewing* provides the spectators with an immense number of impulses and challenges with which the viewers have to cope as the movie progresses. As discussed in the previous part of the thesis, there are many obstacles which have to be overcome in order to appreciate the film: fragmented narrative structure, a kind of detached acting style and dialogues, or importantly, the omnipresence of various screens implying the need to cope with a different way of achieving immediacy. The following part of the thesis will address the issue of media from yet another perspective—as artefacts vulnerable to alterations and manipulations.

2.5 Studying Media through the Lens of a Camera

In *Family Viewing*, Egoyan presents various kinds of media: television, video, surveillance camera or telephone. The following section of the thesis will discuss each of them and their co-existence in the context of the movie in detail.

Television as a Modern Fireplace

Despite a harsh critique which it had to sustain in the past decades (e.g. from the mass-media critics of the Frankfurt school), television became a common part of most modern households. In his lively written essay on the influence of television, Jaromír Volek sums up the arguments of his predecessors that from the end of 1950's TV became a new and penetrative "decoration" and began to substitute for the ever-wavering flame of the home fireplace around which all the members of the family gather (Volek 19).⁷ Rather than taking the usual critical position of the impact of the omnipresence of television on our culture, Volek studies its impact on the family life and stresses its creative rather than the destructive potential. Egoyan's *Family Viewing*, however, seems to incline to the opposite position. Marie-Aude Baronian argues that "the television screen is everywhere and visible in almost every scene of the film. Egoyan appears to be examining the increasing integration of technology into the cosy atmosphere of the Canadian family home" (147). Thus, in his relationship to television, Egoyan seems to be close to the critique of the media theorist and cultural critic Neil Postman who expressed his views on the medium in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985):

Television has achieved the status of "meta-medium"—an instrument that directs not only our knowledge of the world, but our knowledge of ways of knowing as well.

At the same time, television has achieved the status of "myth," as Roland Barthes uses the word. He means by myth a way of understanding the world that is not problematic, that we are not fully conscious of, that seems, in a word, natural. [...] We do not doubt the reality of what we see on television, are largely unaware of the special angle of vision it affords. Even the question of how television affects us has receded into the background. [...] The question has largely disappeared as television has gradually become our culture. (79)

⁷ Volek may refer to Jan Dibbet's television broadcast *TV as a Fireplace* which was shown on the last eight evenings of 1969 by the WDR 3. By his work Dibbets demonstrated that watching television is a collective experience.

Postman's critique is best reflected in the character of Stan. "Let's watch TV with me," Stan invites his son. TV functions as Stan's primary activity and source of entertainment and seems to dominate him completely: he does not remember the age of his son, nor birthday of his mother-in-law, his eyes are always firmly stuck on the screen and the real life around him slips through his fingers. It seems that television caused him to lose the interest in his family, to become emotionally numb. In the interview with Porton, Egoyan called Stan a "TV Dad"—the kind of person who teaches his son lessons that he thinks he should give him, lessons that are stereotypically thought to be taught. However, he does not consider deeper implications of his actions:

Stan: What's wrong?

Van: I've been feeling kind of weird lately.

Stan: What do you mean?

Van: Everything I do feels like I could be doing it... or not. And it wouldn't matter either way.

Stan: That's normal.

Van: Are you sure?

Stan: How old are you now? Sixteen?

Van: Almost eighteen.

Stan: It's part of the age.

Van: In what way?

Stan: Well, you're finishing school, facing adulthood. That sort of thing.

Van: What sort of thing?

Stan: Making decisions.

Van: About my future?

Stan: Yeah.

What dominates in Stan's behaviour regarding his relatives may thus be a desire for conformity required by the mass-culture which TV came to symbolize: to look like a normal and ordinary family, a family with clear roots. Stan strives to affirm his position as a "perfect WASP" in public while he reveals his hidden fantasies and obsessions in private (Baronian 151).

Stan is not the only character in *Family Viewing* influenced by the television culture, or more broadly mass-culture, television has a profound impact on his son as

well. Van's immersion in the televisual interface causes that he is not aware of the suicide taking place in the room of his grandmother in the nursing home (del Río 39). Nevertheless, the treatment of the images and implications of television are not so simple and deserve a more detailed discussion.

The televisual image in *Family Viewing* unfolds primarily in two kinds of settings: in the home of the family and in the nursing home's room occupied by Van's grandmother Armen. Both environments are, however, treated differently.

After the opening credits, the viewers are introduced into the home of the main protagonists who gather in the living room to watch TV together in "a caricature image of western family 'cosiness'" (Baronian 148). In this setting, the camera is placed behind the television so as the viewers cannot see what takes place on the TV screen. Egoyan uses this cliché-like *mise-en-scène* to stress the redundancy of showing the televisual image in comparison with the actual impact of this image on its viewers, image which "becomes immediately imprinted on the viewer's face" (del Río 35). The audiences watching the viewers who watch television, are thus once again forced to acknowledge the act of viewing and by extension are led to reassess their own viewing experience.

In the nursing home, on the other hand, television is presented differently. For Armen, television fills the moments of loneliness as she keeps watching it either alone or together with her grandson. She never shows any emotion while watching it, her face is still the same. Watching television seems not to be her favourite activity but rather a nuisance, something that fills her empty life. In this respect, Armen's TV watching reflects one of the roles of television mentioned by Volek—its ability to (at least temporarily) "cure loneliness" of elderly and lonely people (25). The role of TV is quite ambiguous with regards to Armen because on the one hand, television fills her life that

would otherwise be even more empty and also completely silent, but on the other hand, it symbolically stands between her and her grandson: while they can watch it together, it prevents them for talking to each other, or at least Van talking to his grandmother. Moreover, Armen's life, her age and weary face sharply contrast with the vivid images of nature and beasts in full life presented on the TV screen.

Another characteristic of the placement of television in the nursing home is Egoyan's use of montage-like style to enhance the irony of certain situations. The technique of montage combines the televisual images of nature (mostly mating rituals of animals and events connected to their death) with real-time images from the life of individual family members. Two situations from *Family Viewing* may serve to illustrate this point.

When Aline's mother is committing suicide, Van and his grandmother are watching a nature show about polar bears and are not being aware of what is happening around them. The voice-over coming from TV adds cruel irony to the whole scene: "While the bear appears to be dead, he's actually fast asleep, allowing the biologist to rig it with a small bugging device. The tranquillizer is very stiff. Though accidents do occur, this is definitely not a job for the faint-hearted. Now with antenna and portable receiver, the scientists can pinpoint the animals' exact location. Several times a day, if necessary." The scene points to the fact that people are able to monitor animal life almost instantaneously and stress the scientific knowledge related to the life of animals but do not care about other people, they are even not aware of what is happening in their closest surroundings (del Río 38).

The other scene is not only ironic but also amusing: when Stan visits Armen in the nursing home after a long time (presumably several years), he goes to the last room he remembers she occupied but there is another woman whom he mistakes for Armen.

Van takes his father to the correct room and Armen furiously attacks him while the voiceover coming from television comments on the viciousness among owls: “Although this attack has occurred in daylight, owls can locate a mouse in light 10 to 100 times dimmer than that needed by the human eye.” The parallel between Armen’s attack and the attack of an owl switches the roles of the woman and the animal because the animal attacks for survival while the woman out of hate. Egoyan’s montage thus “serves to ironize the human-animal hierarchy, equating, if not reversing, the terms involved” (del Río 38).

The technique of montage used for these scenes is not important only for the ironic effect but it is important *per se*. As Bolter and Grusin argue, collage and photomontage (or montage in general) provide evidence of the modernist fascination with the reality of media (38) and in the context of *Family Viewing* also of the importance placed on the media. Collage and photomontage create images by rearranging existing forms, in other words they “define a space through the disposition and interplay of forms that have been detached from their original context and then recombined” (Bolter and Grusin 39). By employment of this technique Egoyan makes the viewers aware of the process of construction (as Tschafen and Burwell states, he forces us to “view the frame and the picture” (16)). As a result, the audiences not only become hyperconscious of the medium (as Bolter and Grusin suggest) but are also made to realize a certain distance between themselves and the image seen, and also between the individual characters in the story, as argued by Elena del Río (35-36). Even though del Río maintains that Egoyan’s montage is not a traditional one because it does not rely “on the shock effect” produced by a combination of heterogeneous images, but rather on the clash of elements within one frame, she still confirms that this technique is a “powerful tool of estrangement and distanciation, dislodging the institutions of the

family and of television from the safety of their boundaries” (35-36). As del Río further adds, the film’s use of montage questions the distance between what is represented in and by television (39). If television has the montage potential as del Río implies, it causes the viewers to oscillate between “looking *at* and looking *through*” (Lanham in Bolter and Grusin 41) and thus enables them to look beyond the surface, beyond what is immediately obvious (del Río 40).

Video as an Experience

From its beginnings, video has always been a favourite means of expression for artists working in various areas: from videoart to installation art and film. For Atom Egoyan video is one of the most important themes in many of his movies especially because it has a significant relationship to memory and experience (Egoyan, “Family Romances”). When talking about *Next of Kin*, Egoyan described the function of video in the movie in the following way: it “is quite literal; it serves as a conduit to another person’s life, as a means of getting information and access to someone else’s experience” (qtd. in Shary, “Video” 4). This can certainly be applied to *Family Viewing* as well. Egoyan’s treatment of video in *Family Viewing* seems to be quite ambiguous: it certainly has some benefits for human life but there are also various negatives involved. What is more, the dividing line between the positive and negative is the closest possible: while video can be used as a controlling mechanism, it can also supply for memory and, at least in a limited way, mediate an access to a lost person. Jonathan Romney sums up the two kinds of treatment in the following way: “the video in the movie appears in a positive light when analogous with the workings of the psyche, in a negative one when it claims to represent the world, which it really caricatures and degrades” (qtd. in Baronian 151). On a more general level, video in *Family Viewing* functions as the

driving force of the narrative because the interactions of the characters with images provide the story with its conflicts, resolutions as well as the emotional impact (Shary, “Video” 8).

As regards the relationship of individual characters to the video apparatus, it is very personal. The positions range from techno-optimistic (Stan) to techno-pessimistic (Aline) but everyone has to come to terms with it and re-assess their opinions as the plot develops. There are four dominant themes explored in *Family Viewing* with regards to video: the relation of video and memory and the ability of video to supply for memory; relation of video and live experience; the theme of video as a means of manipulation, control and surveillance; and finally, the possibility of treating the video as a fetish. Egoyan’s treatment of video with respect to individual characters within the story and its co-existence with other media in *Family Viewing* are discussed in the following part of the thesis.

Video as Memory and History

While children may insist that the experience of the medium of video or television is itself an experience of the real (e.g. believing in the reality of cartoon movies), adults are usually able to distinguish between reality and mediation. However, they may unconsciously lose this capacity when video begins to supply for their own memory: people keep visual records in order to remember things and in order to be able to think back clearly and precisely. Their memories are turned into possession, into material outputs in the form of video cassettes. On the other hand, the question of how many of these tapes are reviewed by people who shoot them is of some relevance here—maybe it is rather the feeling of possession of something, of having the possibility of keeping the record than the actual act of shooting.

Van's position to video is most ambiguous and changeable and may serve as the best example of the relationship of video and memory or history. As Timothy Shary argues, the home video footage from Van's childhood shows how video destroys Van's personality ("Video" 14). On the other hand, for Van, and also for Armen, video provides the only possible access to the lost member of the family, Van's mother. Thanks to it, Van can re-establish the relationship with his mother and re-discover a hidden part of his identity—his Armenian roots (del Río 42). At the same time, thanks to the same video footage Van is able to take his life into his own hands: when he discovers that his father erases video tapes from his childhood and tapes them over with the home porn, he takes them away to prevent his father from erasing them and thus symbolically saves the Armenian part of himself.

These cassettes which are of such an interest for Van were taped a long time ago. They show Van, who does not speak English yet but only Armenian, his mother and grandmother, all of them being very happy (in fact, they are shown happy on these videotapes only). Stan, as the last member, is always outside the image, he is the one who is responsible for the camera work and thus stands apart from his family, being divided from it not only by the camera interface but also by a cultural barrier. He is, in a way, the director of the family life but at the same time is excluded from it. The camera therefore serves as a kind of barrier between the life in the picture and behind it, uniting the people in front of the camera lens and isolating the person behind.⁸

Thanks to the video footage, the viewers together with Van learn the family history, it can be felt though that it is something sacred and personal revealed through a medium which together with the spectators intrudes into the secret life of the family

⁸ Egoyan's other feature *Calendar* investigates this topic in depth and the outcome is similar: a photographer who is responsible for taking photos for a calendar always remains outside the picture, he shoots what the camera sees but is not able to come from the outside to taste the life in front of the camera and is thus finally divided from his wife who leaves him.

(Baronian 152). Video thus exposes the intimacies of family life and projects them into public (Chappel, “Alain Resnais”). Thanks to it, the viewers know a lot about the family history towards the end of *Family Viewing*—the happy moments of the family unity as well as the reason for its breakdown. Video thus documents the process of the gradual breakdown of the family. In the beginning of the movie, the viewers are not able to see who is in charge of the shooting, they can only assume it is Stan. Towards the end as Van is being slowly turned into a Canadian and presumably begins to forget about his Armenian roots, the viewers are able to see more from the person who operates the video camera. In one of the final scenes, this development culminates and the spectators are able to see Stan’s hand and part of his body; this moment is very significant for him because right then Van learned his first English song and the change of his identity began to take its course: he will gradually forget about his Armenian heritage and will become a pure Canadian. At the same time the viewer may feel that Van’s ties to his mother and grandmother will soon begin to be disrupted and then broken completely because they already know that at present the family unity is broken. The camera within the film gradually draws Van and Stan into one shot suggesting that they are going to be closer to each other and at the same time more distant from Van’s mother and grandmother. In this scene the viewers inevitably connect the past with the present of the family, may even feel pity for its breakdown and maybe some of them hope Van did not learn that English song and remained closer to his Armenian roots.

The happy moments from the past shown on the video when Armen was still in full life sharply contrast with the present and her loneliness. Despite this, she seems to be pleased by watching the video with her grandson; she can remember the good old times and thus come to terms not only with her age but also with what happened in her life up to date. The opportunity of watching oneself on a tape enables its viewer to

“distance oneself from the image and evaluate it with a detached safety” (Shary, “Video” 6). Video therefore becomes a kind of therapy for both Armen and Van, who apparently misses his mother very much and needs to cope with her loss. Moreover, it enables him to re-identify himself in relation to his family and to discover a part of his self: he gains his identity through re-viewing his life on video (Shary, “Video” 9). For the viewer, it serves as a window to the past of the family, providing an access to what would otherwise remain hidden and unexplained.

In video, there is a danger of one’s own memories being mistaken with the memories of someone else, possibly with the photographer behind the camera because it is in fact his view with which the viewers of his movie are identified, or also a danger of losing the capacity to distinguish a mediated event with a real-time one. Aline at first watches the funeral of her mother that Van shot for her with contempt and rejection, she cannot believe that Van was able to do what he did:

Van: It was a good funeral, Aline. Believe me, you wouldn’t have done it any differently.

Aline: I would have been there.

Van: But you weren’t. You were out of town. And now you’re watching it.

Aline: On television.

Van: Sure. You’re just not in the right mood. But when you are you can play it...any time you want.

This infuriates Aline and she throws the tape back at Van. While the viewers most probably back with Aline who missed the opportunity to tell goodbye to her mother personally, they at least partly understand why Van behaved in the way he did: it is better to have a tape from the funeral than nothing, no memory to relate to. Aline takes the opposing position than Van: while he seems to naïvely believe in the full correspondence between mediated and actually lived events, Aline takes on the humanist technophobic perspective which stands for the belief that if the technological developments were not controlled, they would “make human action and emotion

obsolete and wholly dispensable” (del Río 44-45). The reason for her choice of position may be seen in the fact that the human memory has the ability to forget unpleasant experiences or at least, blur their vividness. Video memory, on the other hand, is crueller because it repetitively shows the event with all its details and Aline maybe does not want to play the painful moments over again. The viewers are left in doubt which position to accommodate, which side is the correct one.

This question may be answered later in the movie when Aline takes over these video memories for her own: after she tries to act up once more as Stan’s sexual drive on the telephone, she breaks up and starts sobbing. This scene is inter-cut with the images from the funeral which suggest that even though she tried to resist the power of video images, she took them over and made them her own. She ultimately begins to visit her mother’s grave and is thus able to accept her mother’s death as a fact. She needed the memory of the funeral in order to be able to cope with the loss of her mother, to release her emotions. At the end, both Aline’s and Van’s positions are therefore drawn together: both of them use video as a means of dealing with the loss of a beloved person.

This scene draws attention to yet another problem—the question of whether a real-time experience is in any way related or continuous to the same experience mediated by video. While Van was physically present during the funeral ceremony, Aline was not. It is obvious that their experience of the funeral as a direct experience for Van and indirect for Aline will be different. However, Van refuses to accept that mediated experience is different from real-time one and by requiring Aline to accept the tape as a substitute for her personal presence during the ceremony, Van demands her to identify with his point of view. In other words, Van does not understand that “to view is not to experience” (Shary, “Video” 19). Both positions are justifiable: Aline’s

technophobia as well as Van's over-enthusiasm. Thanks to video, Van is able to supply memories which he would not otherwise have and wants to share these advantages with Aline.

The use of video in *Family Viewing* with relation to memory and real-time experience is, as illustrated above, largely ambiguous. On the one hand, it may serve as a means of re-discovery of one's identity and remembering members of family who are no longer present but at the same time its use may go too far and in the most radical position, video can replace the actual lived experience. This ambiguity was certainly intentional as Egoyan confirms: "It's very easy to take a moralistic position and condemn these technologies, but the fact is that they are with us" (Porton, "Family Romances"). He further stresses that rather than demonizing technology or allowing it to become ordinary, one should learn how to use it (Porton, "Family Romances").

Video as a fetishistic token and means of control

The position of Stan to video is different from the younger generation. Unlike Van, he is the producer of images from the beginning—he shot the family idyll that Van watches with his grandmother at present, thus acting as the director of the family life. While Van, Aline and Armen need video in order to cope with their lives and especially with the loss of a beloved person, Stan uses it as a confirmation of his power and a fetish, something he needs for satisfying his personal, social as well as sexual needs. The scenes of him having sex with Sandra may serve as the best example. Stan and Sandra sit on their bed, Sandra apparently not looking forward to what is about come, Stan's face showing commitment and determination. He turns on a camera pointing to the bed so as they are able to watch their image on its screen. While Stan is waiting for her call, Aline sits on a couch in her apartment. Soon, the telephone rings and Aline

starts responding to Stan's cues. Stan then instructs Sandra do what Aline says she would "dream of doing to a man like [him]". Sandra is apparently not interested in the sex play that Stan initiates but she dare not say a word and does what Aline says through the telephone. Even here Stan acts as the director of the whole scene (and subsequently of his family)—he controls both women, by his cues he determines the words Aline has to use and at the same time deprives Sandra of taking any action of her own. The scene is very sterile and artificial but not due to the use of video as a mediator of the sexual act but rather due to Stan's calculated scenario and the distance between the spouses—while they sit next to each other in their bed, it is as if they were in the opposite corners of the room: "The filmic camera visualizes this split by showing Stan and Sandra as capable of two radically different looks: the gaze as lack and the gaze as narcissistic plenitude" (del Río 43).

By recording of these repetitive and meaningless sexual encounters over the family history, Stan maintains control over his son whom he deprives of his childhood memories and happiness. His act is quite symbolic: by erasing the old memories with the new ones, he replaces the past with the present and he may possibly try to deal with his identity and with what he did to his wife in the past because, as the viewers later learn, it was Stan's special sexual taste that made Van's mother leave them. He may also want to forget that it was him who broke the family, he may even want to forget about his wife completely:

The power of memory is that it has the ability to accommodate and change, and to vary according to what you want a memory to do for you. But the fact is that a videotape is fixed, and it is completely unbending, and its power is more aligned to what it represents than to what it actually gives the viewer... It's the knowledge of what is on those tapes that gives power to what Stan is doing by erasing over those images. (Egoyan qtd. in Shary, "Video" 13)

Thus, Stan symbolically replaces old memories with new ones, replaces his old wife with a new one who is, in his words more “comfortable” for him:

Van: Do you love her?
Stan: That’s a funny question.
Van: I’m just asking.
Stan: Why?
Van: I don’t know.
Stan: I... appreciate her simplicity. I’m tired of complications.
Van: Do you think she’s simple?
Stan: Well, she’s not exactly a burden.
Van: And that’s what you’re looking for.
Stan: I want things to be comfortable. Yes.

This scene invites the comparison of Sandra with Van’s mother, even though the latter one does not appear in the movie till the very end. Van’s mother was very probably a burden for Stan because she came from a foreign country, probably could not speak English well and probably did not like Stan’s sexual appetite. Sandra is the opposite, she is a submissive woman who subordinates her own needs and passions to that of Stan, her sense of family is closer to Stan’s than to that of Van and his mother. While Van wants to keep the family together, which is illustrated by his effort to take Armen out of the nursing home, Sandra not only sleeps with Stan but she also tries to seduce his son.

Stan’s need to control the family is even more pronounced towards the end when he begins to suspect that Armen is still alive and that Van is keeping her somewhere. He hires a private detective to find out the truth for him. The camera as a tool of surveillance here comes to focus conveying the feeling that anybody can be observed at any time.

The surveillance camera for the first time appears on the scene at the very beginning when Aline enters the place where she works as a phone-sex operator. Later, when she leaves the town to meet a man to provide him the escort service, one can see

her through the surveillance camera system placed in the hall of the hotel, entering the hotel room followed by the man who sexually forces himself on her. When the door is closed, the viewers are still watching the scene inside the hotel room through the same surveillance camera but they feel, even though maybe unconsciously, that there cannot be any camera inside the room and that “the image has become her state of mind” (Egoyan qtd. in Shary, “Video” 12). It is as if she together with the viewers was watching the scene from a distance, her body being separated from her mind.

The last time the surveillance camera comes to focus is the most important in the whole movie because it sums up what one has seen up to this moment and adds an important meaning. In the closing scene the audiences see Van and Aline entering a homeless shelter and the camera takes them through the whole room. Then, Egoyan cuts to Van as a boy, who looks into the camera-within-a-camera. A cross-cut takes them back to the homeless shelter and shows a surveillance camera placed at the top of the room. Another cut to young Van looking directly to the camera and going nearer to it follows and then another cross-cut shows the surveillance camera in the homeless shelter which turns into the direction where Armen sits on the bed with her daughter. As Shary asserts the cross-cutting sequences suggest direct links between the present and the past: Armen and her daughter are looking at Van but instead of the current image of Van the viewers are provided with his image as a young boy—Egoyan here may point out that Van might continue where he ended as a child, he may develop his relationship with his mother and grandmother, and he also has finally managed to establish his identity (“Video” 20). This new identity is the result of a personal transformation from a passive receiver of images, which he was when he lived with his father, to an active member of a new family, creator of images and active spectator who is able to make his own judgements and who is aware of the meaning of his past (Baronian 149).

The final scene is very peaceful and joyous even though one does not hear the words that Armen, her daughter and Van exchange but one can see their faces which show delight, and can almost feel what they feel. Shary suggests that this scene may convey the fact that the surveillance camera is incapable to capture the emotion of this event ("Video" 20). The silence may, however, be also taken as Egoyan's perhaps unconscious reference to one of the most famous postmodern composers John Cage who came up with the idea that not only sounds and words are meaningful but silence should also be considered during the act of listening. When people cannot hear anything else around them but silence, they are forced to acknowledge natural sounds around and inside, and concentrate more on the emotions and feelings.⁹ Not only words but also a silent image is thus capable of conveying a deep emotion.

The presence of the surveillance camera is felt very strongly in the end and the movie thus symbolically returns back to the beginning when the viewers saw Aline for the first time through the lens of another surveillance system. It is stressed even more by the last image in the movie showing Stan on video, he is in front of the camera which oversees the garden of their house through window where small Van and his mother play together. It does not matter whether it is Stan who watches the final re-union of the family but there is always somebody who can do that. By watching the final sequences the viewers also realize that Stan's camera and the surveillance camera provided them the access to the life of a family, adding to the feeling of reality of the whole movie. While usage of surveillance camera systems at public places is questionable, the viewers are now probably pleased that it enabled them to watch something personal,

⁹ Cage's notoriously well-known piece that advocates the idea of silence as music is called 4'33" (1952), the so called "silent piece". It consists of four minutes and thirty-three seconds in which the performer plays nothing. Cage thus wanted to point out that silence had to be redefined and that there was no objective dichotomy between sound and silence, but only between the intent of diverting one's attention to sounds. The listeners were irritated but still, Cage accomplished what he had intended (John Cage: 4'33", mediaartnet.org).

something that would have otherwise remained hidden, and thus only confirms the ambiguous treatment of technologies in *Family Viewing*. Only now are the spectators able to fully appreciate the title of the movie: they become aware that they saw an essential part of the history of a family whose members watched their history together with them. This is one of the reasons why one cannot consider *Family Viewing* cold, it is very personal.

Conclusion

In *Family Viewing* Egoyan articulates many questions that arise with the spread of video and other modern technologies. He forces his characters to come to terms with it and at the same time also makes the viewers find their way. Egoyan does not look at these questions simplistically from exclusively techno-optimistic or techno-pessimistic point of view; he rather addresses the themes in a complex way and treats media as technologies that cannot be judged easily (as both “aura” and “fetish” as del Río presents in her insightful analysis). In this respect, technologies are like people who sometimes try to appear simpler than they actually are (as illustrated by Stan). While technology may serve as a means of control, of doing harm to people around and as a personal fetish, it may at the same time provide an access to the lost relative, become the means of establishing one’s identity and may also serve as a precise, even though uncompromising, memory. It can therefore be argued that media within the movie drive the characters within it, serving as “arenas through which the characters can perform and act out their identities” (del Río 21). The implications do not concern only the characters in the movie but the spectators themselves: together with the characters of the highly self-reflexive *Family Viewing* they need to re-consider the overproduction of

video images around them and observe themselves through the lens of an imaginary camera placed in the corner of their living rooms.

3. Patricia Rozema: *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*

Patricia Rozema is one of the most successful and critically acclaimed Canadian directors, who at the age of 28 became Canada's first female filmmaker to win a significant international reputation (Johnson, "Sex and the Sacred Girl"). Her works, like the works of many other famous filmmakers, have provoked strong reactions, both positive and negative. Especially her second feature *White Room* (1990) was widely criticized and Rozema was even thinking about leaving the film industry completely (Johnson, "Rozema"). However, she endured the pressure and her next feature *When Night Is Falling* (1995) brought her success with the critics who were "thoroughly seduced by Rozema's sophisticated and sensual vision" again (Johnson, "Sex and the Sacred Girl").

The following subchapter of the thesis covers a brief biography of Rozema and her filmography, which will enable one to see the analyzed film *Mermaids* in wider context of the director's life and her oeuvre.

3.1 Patricia Rozema, a Feminist Filmmaker?

Patricia Rozema was born in Kingston, Ontario, in 1958 to a family of Dutch Calvinists, devoted members of the Christian Reformed Church. She grew up in a very strict Calvinist enclave and thus did not have access to films at all until the age of 16 when she saw her first movie (Marx, "Patricia Rozema Biography"). She received Dutch Calvinist school education and graduated in philosophy and English from Calvin College in Michigan. During her studies she decided to become a journalist but soon changed her mind because she found journalism too restricting (Johnson, "Rozema"). She then enrolled in a five-week course of film production and made her award-winning

26-minute black and white debut *Passion: A Letter in 16 mm* (1985), which was included in the Canadian Festival of Festivals and won a Silver Plaque at the Chicago International Film Festival (Austin-Smith 209). She gained further experience as the third assistant director on David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986) as well as on a number of television shows. She then began submitting her own proposals to art councils and even though several of them were rejected, she persisted and finally managed to make her first full-length feature *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987) which was an enormous success, both with the critics and at the box-office.

Throughout her career Rozema has written, directed, edited and produced eight features, number of films of short and medium length, including an experimental documentary about J.S. Bach *Six Gestures* (1997) ("Who I Am"). Her career is marked by a characteristic style and themes that are discussed in the following part of the thesis.

The Feature Films of Patricia Rozema

Rozema's first feature *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* gained her an unexpected fame world-wide and augured the path she was going to take in her career. She debuted at a time marked by the emergence of a group of filmmakers who shared an innovative use of narrative film forms and who have also become well-known world-wide: Atom Egoyan, Denys Arcand or Jean-Claude Lauzon. All of them came from marginalized groups within Canadian context, including Rozema, who differs from the others by being a woman and a lesbian (Alemany-Galway, "Postmodernism" 25).

The uniqueness of Rozema's work, however, does not lie in her sexual orientation. It is the artistic expression of Rozema's work that is "one of her noblest endeavours"—by pushing boundaries, searching for context, reinventing and employing other cultural works Rozema questions the authorship itself: the process of creativity

and self-expression, traditional aesthetic standards and the value of artistic creation (del Sorbo, “The Polyphonic Nature”). Rozema established her style and thematic area that would later define her entire work soon after her debut. Her films are based on a unique sensual visual style and have a “vibrant, formal adventurousness” marked by “self-referential narration and a rich intertextuality” (del Sorbo, “The Polyphonic Nature”). Many of her works are driven by a search for transcendence (Parpart 294) and are pre-occupied with various aspects of Canadianness (Cagle 185).

Rozema’s movies are, however, most often defined and analyzed in terms of the feminist and queer theories. Even though she considers herself a feminist, she strictly refuses the label of “a feminist filmmaker” (Parpart 296). She even claims that gender is a category that does not interest her at all (Cagle 185), the opinion which she directly articulates through Polly, the main heroine of *Mermaids*, who during one of her dream sequences says that “gender is irrelevant in matters of the heart”.

Even though they may be considered as conforming to the standards of Hollywood filmmaking as regards the production values, her characters are hardly typical of the mainstream: they are outsiders, alienated from the world, who gain access to happiness only “through media(ted) formulas for fantasy” (Cagle 184). The alienation may stem from the tension between their inner life and public world they inhabit (Harley 460). Rozema asserts that the feeling of alienation of her characters comes from the nature of Canadianness itself and thus confirms that she is inclined to examine the national aspects of her works rather than those connected with gender:

As Canadians, we’re beside this big, chest-thumping, self-absorbed power—a culture that is aggressive, exciting, but kind of obnoxious at times. We’ve always felt a little bit like a minority on someone else’s continent. So it seems like a realistic presentation of my reality to present characters who don’t quite belong, who don’t quite fit in, who can’t pledge allegiance to the most accepted creed. (qtd. in Cagle 184)

Rozema's filmmaking style and the type of characters she chooses create a particular kind of intimacy between the spectators and the characters within the story which is further enhanced by her effort to show untainted reality with people behaving naturally (Johnson, "Rozema"). She thinks of the filmmaking process as of a search and explains that she strives to "tell the truth about what one still doesn't understand" (qtd. in del Sorbo, "The Polyphonic Nature"). The meaning of her movies therefore may not always be immediately evident but needs to be pieced together from individual images and scenes. The viewers are thus together with the characters involved in a very intimate and personal journey of self-discovery and re-definition of themselves within the world around them.

3.2 Rozema's Singing Mermaids

As already discussed above, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987), Rozema's first feature, received a glowing response: after the screening at the Cannes Film Festival in 1987 it was even awarded by the now legendary 6-minute standing ovation from the international press (Parpart 294). The movie gained numerous prizes, including the Prix de La Jeunesse at the Cannes Film Festival and two Genie awards for best performance by an actress in a leading and supporting role. The immense success of *Mermaids* also helped to reshape Canada's publicly funded film industry as it proved that even a low-budget arty movie could earn money (Johnson, "Rozema"): while it had the budget of less than \$400,000, it earned approximately \$2.5 million in the USA, and \$644,000 in Canada (Posner qtd. in Austin-Smith 210).

Even though all of the reactions were unanimous in the evaluation of the film as "whimsical" and "wacky", they were still both negative as well as positive. The source of disagreement between the reviewers was especially the performance of Sheila

McCarthy as Polly. Some, especially those coming from the mainstream cinema, praised it as a “stellar performance” (Johnson, “Sex and the Sacred Girl”), others revealed that they are not able to tolerate an unconventional character (Austin-Smith 210).

Heated discussions were also led over *Mermaids* being or not being a feminist movie. For example Harrison argued that a closer analysis of the themes and narrative structure of the movie reveals that a feminist reading would be misguided. Theresa de Lauretis, an eminent feminist film critic, even dismissed the movie as non-feminist and homophobic. But some others, like George Godwin, came to the opposite conclusion (Alemany-Galway, “Postmodernism” 28). *Mermaids* at least has a feminist potential: it was written, produced and directed by a woman, all the main characters are also women, and the movie moreover directly addresses the issues connected with womanhood and at the same time challenges women’s usual depiction. However, the content of the film can still be considered quite conventional despite its innovative narrative form and engaging characters because it does not marshal its feminist potential towards any profound solutions (Austin-Smith 212). Rather than conveying deep social consequences, it is concerned with private dreams and inner life of the main heroine.

Even though the number of characters in *Mermaids* is low and the plot is simple, the film manages to address many themes. It is about “a desire to create a work of self-expression” and about the “subtle aspects of communication” (Cagle 188). It draws attention to the issues connected with Canadianess and its typical art form of documentary, while at the same time challenges both concepts: Polly balances on the boundary between fantasy (inner life) and reality. The movie thus addresses the inner tension of the main character as being defined from within (personal, fantasy world) and from without (society, everyday reality). Consequently, it can also be described as a

story of a search for one's identity and importantly also for one's position within the society. On a more general level, *Mermaids* initiates the debates over what can be considered an artistic achievement, debates over the relationship of art and one's faith, and also over the position of religion in modern society. Finally, the movie expresses Rozema's fascination with images and consequently draws attention to the status and functions of media, not on the level of a family or society but on the level of an individual, the artist.

3.3 Synopsis

Mermaids opens with the view of the main protagonist Polly (Sheila McCarthy) who tries to adjust herself in front of a video camera in preparations for a videotaped confession. She introduces herself by saying that she is a 31 year old "organizationally impaired" temporary secretary and then continues by telling the story of the past weeks of her life.

She begins her confession in the moment she was hired as a temporary secretary by Gabrielle (Paule Baillargeon), a curator in a private art gallery. Polly apparently admires Gabrielle and admits she has fallen in love with her. Gabrielle is a lesbian and has a younger girlfriend Mary (Ann-Marie MacDonald), who is a painter. Mary returns after some time of an absence to restore their relationship.

The viewers soon learn that Polly lives alone except for her cat in a small apartment and fills her time with her hobby of photography. She likes riding through Toronto on her bicycle, observing the buildings and people, and taking photographs full of joy and life. She then retreats into her bathroom where she develops the black and white photos. This improvised darkroom is also the place where Polly indulges in her daydreaming.

Polly seems to have no friends at all and all her social contacts in the film are initiated by the curator: she is invited into a Japanese restaurant where she is offered a permanent part-time job, and later she accepts the invitation to Gabrielle's birthday party. It is at the birthday party where she can, for the first time, see what she considers to be Gabrielle's painting. She is so fascinated by its beauty (even though it is only an illuminated blank canvas) that she is not able to resist and takes one of the canvases to the gallery. Thanks to the painting Polly begins to think they have similar taste of art and similar artistic expression with Gabrielle and she decides to send her own photographs into the gallery under a pseudonym. However, she is disappointed and hurt when Gabrielle rejects the photographs by calling them "simple-minded" and "trite made flesh" and suspects they were sent by a little girl. Polly temporarily quits the gallery, pretends that she is ill and sinks into a depression, thinking that she can never succeed as an artist. She burns all her photographs and destroys her camera in despair. After she returns to the gallery, she slowly begins to change her opinion on the autonomy of art critics when Mary notices one of her photographs and questions the legitimacy of art reviews which in her opinion do not have any right to judge on what is good and what not.

Later, Polly eavesdrops on a conversation between Gabrielle and Mary thanks to which she learns that the true artist and the author of the painting is not Gabrielle but Mary. This deception infuriates Polly and she throws a cup of hot tea at Gabrielle. This is the last scene of Polly's video-taped narration and the viewers are transferred to the "real-time" of Polly finishing her confession. At the moment she is concluding her narrative, Mary and Gabrielle come to visit Polly in her flat and realize that the photographs sent to the gallery were Polly's. As the film draws to the end, Polly invites

both women to see more of her photographs and takes them by an open door into the world of her fantasy represented as idyllic woodland.

3.4 Mediating the Immediate: Properties of Video and Film in *Mermaids*

Media and various technological apparatuses in Rozema's *Mermaids* are not as omni-present as in Egoyan's *Family Viewing* but their employment is still very significant for the plot, mood and overall meaning of the movie. *Mermaids* takes place in two media settings, film and video, while two other media are employed to examine the role of authorship, photography and painting.

The film is framed by a video-taped narrative of the main heroine Polly. At the beginning she introduces herself on a video-within-the-film screen and then proceeds to commenting on the events of the past days of her life in filmed sequences accompanied by her voice-over, which deftly shift into filmed scenes capturing the events of the past days in detail. The plot thus unfolds on two levels: Polly's past is depicted on the film screen in flashbacks and her present self on the video. The two settings are complemented by a third level integrated into the film settings—Polly's dream fantasies of herself flying over Toronto, listening to singing mermaids when sitting by the sea, walking on water with Gabrielle, or conducting an orchestra. The narrative swiftly shifts from one level to another—from the past presented in the film mode, through her dreams to her present self on the video screen, and then back again. In the end, the three levels merge into one as the past fuses with present and fantasy with reality (Austin-Smith 223). The structure of the movie can thus be called a mosaic integrating three visual and narrative lines while the overall meaning needs to be pieced out from the fusion of the three individual parts.

The video and filmic modes provide the viewers with a different kind of information about Polly, and function differently also in her presentation and perception. According to Shary, the video camera in the movie provides the spectator of *Mermaids* with “a limited field of vision,” controlled by Polly herself, while the film portrays “an omniscient ‘reality’ of Polly’s past” (Shary, “Present” 44). It may, however, be also argued that the filmed sequences are an extension of the video scenes, and Polly’s vivid recollections of the past events— a story unfolding in her mind and projected onto the film screen, in which she watches herself from a distance. Therefore, even though the film retains a seemingly objective look, it may be considered subjective and “limited” in the same way as the video because it is Polly who chooses and controls what the spectators will see next. The scene in which the viewers shift from Polly’s video narration to the flashback scene accompanied by Polly’s voice-over describing her platonic love for Gabrielle may be taken as an example supporting this argument because it reveals a disjunction in Polly’s conscious thinking and her unconscious feeling. When describing the love for Gabrielle, Polly always talks in terms of a platonic feeling: “I think I kind of fell in love with the curator. I know that love is a pretty strong word when you’re talking about another woman and she’s not your mother, but there you go. I don’t think I wanted kissing and all that stuff. I just, I just loved her.” But she may not be completely honest to the viewers and to herself because the camera, focusing on the intimate parts of Gabrielle’s body, caresses it in a non-platonic way and thus directly reminds the viewers of her sexuality. At the same time, the shot on Polly looking at Gabrielle’s body and the subsequent detail of Gabrielle’s body shot from Poly’s point of view suggest that Polly is not only platonically in love with her but sexually attracted to her as well (Austin-Smith 223). It is the film camera that reveals the ambiguity between what Polly says and thinks about: when she

comments on her love for Gabrielle in a voice-over, the camera shoots what she is looking at and probably unconsciously thinking of. The filmic camera, therefore, does not need to be as omniscient as Shary asserts but may also be considerably influenced by Polly's point of view.

As suggested above, the distinctness of video and film in *Mermaids* are the key elements in interpretation of the movie. Unlike the vision scenes, which are relevant for the insight into the inner life of Polly and which result in better understanding of Poly's thinking and feeling, they are the sites that drive the plot. The distinction between the video and filmic modes lies primarily in the visual style of both settings. While the filmed sequences are well-focused with vibrant colours, the video-taped scenes are out of focus with pale colours, and a low-resolution and slightly panning picture. This distinction leads the viewers into considering the video scenes to be home-made by an amateur as opposed to the professional look of the filmed sequences. The beginning of the movie may serve to illustrate this point. During the opening credits, even before the viewers see the main protagonist for the first time, they are able to hear her voice which disrupts the usual flow of a movie: "Hello, hello, hello. Testing. One, two, three. I guess it's on." She thus clumsily pushes herself into the picture and forces the viewers to take her into account even before they are able to see her, and makes them decipher the significance of her voice within the context. The amateur look of her home video accompanied by the traditional mistake of amateur video operators who, due to the lack of experience with the apparatus, shoot unwanted pictures (e.g. their own legs) or do not position the object of their lens to the centre of the picture, may consequently also evoke the spectators' own home-video practices (Moran 175). The spectators consequently consider the crude video images to be more familiar and personal than the

polished filmed scenes which are associated with professional filmmakers and imaginary worlds.

Apart from the familiarity and personal appeal of video, there are other video properties that determine the meaning of its use in films in general, and in *Mermaids* in particular. As Timothy Shary argues, video as an apparatus is unique in terms of its association with “live” reality, immediacy of transmission and simultaneous viewing of the event shot, unlike film which needs time to be developed (“Present” 41). He quotes Jarice Hanson who observed this phenomenon as well:

The video image is perceived by the viewer or user as a live, or immediate, message, even if the communication had been recorded and reproduced with the aid of videotape. [...] Because video technologies use the electronic mode of message transfer, the images all appear to be live. [...] but the information is instantaneous, and appears to be available in “real time,” rather than through a delayed process. (qtd. in Shary, “Present” 42)

As a result, when video appears within a film, its image seems to be more imminent and real. The visual distinctness and properties traditionally associated with the video apparatus cause that the spectators are inclined to believe that the narrative is not a fiction but reality. The direct address of the camera by the main heroine and the play on the spectators’ own experience with home video further adds to the feeling of authenticity of the story. James Moran supports and further develops this argument by claiming that video usually connotes an “ideology of immediacy” and home video an “ideology of domesticity”. These connotations consequently cause that

the discourse of the VIT [video-in-the-text] negotiates, even blurs, the impersonal narration of cinematic fiction and the personal narration of the causal agencies operating within its diegesis as characters. In other words, in instances where cinema constructs a fictional world as if it existed autonomously, directly present to our vision, without source of origin, the VIT reports on that fictional world in the manner of a witness or participant. (181)

Thanks to the employment of video within film the viewers are encouraged to believe Polly’s personal confession together with the events she describes to be true (as

well as Polly herself). Moreover, they are given the impression that the story she narrates is “recreated” before their eyes, through the projection of her memories and fantasies (Shary, “Present” 47). Video in *Mermaids* thus makes the usually fictional settings of the film appear more personal, authentic and autobiographical, immediate and true.

Video as a Means of Access to the Internal and the External

The self-reflective nature of Polly’s confession through video and the autobiographical feeling evoked is not a unique characteristic of Rozema’s *Mermaids*: many other features use video in the “testimonial function” (Moran 197). The characters of these films often video-tape themselves and confess their private feelings and beliefs. This practice enables them to obtain “a deepening awareness of dysfunction that in turn provokes positive behavioural change” (Moran 199) or, as Shary similarly argues, to “distance oneself from the image and evaluate it with a detached safety” (“Video” 6). Video in *Mermaids* may thus be considered to serve as “a mirror reflecting Polly back to herself in a confrontation that deepens her self-awareness” (Moran 198) and thus help her to establish her identity within the world around her. Not only the characters themselves have the opportunity to replay the tapes and re-evaluate their lives, but the viewers are also offered the possibility to keep this objective distance and analyze the characters.

The form of video-confession further draws attention to the clash between the internal world of the main heroine and the public one. As Marion Harrison asserts in her analysis of *Mermaids*, the practice of videotaping is like keeping a diary—an autobiographical expression of events, thoughts, feelings and dreams that is traditionally associated with women. Unlike the traditional diary written on paper which was private

and almost sacred, Polly's video diary, however, has the opposite function: it is meant to make Polly's life and experience public. The clash of private confession exposed to the public eye further stresses the need of the main heroine to find a balance between her inner self and the world around her, including the people she meets and the audience she addresses.

Both Harrison and Austin-Smith connect the potential of video to serve as a personal diary to the Canadian tradition of documentary cinema based on realism. The aspect of realism expressed through the video diary is then further stressed by Polly's photographs, for she takes "pictures of things that she likes," pictures of "real people and real places," (Alemany-Galway, "Postmodernism" 34). While the movie indeed evokes the documentary tradition inherent to Canadian filmmaking, it is not primarily pre-occupied with documenting events as they really happened. Its main aim is to portray the psychic development of the leading character, who is the sole author of the narrative. Therefore, this portrayal is necessarily subjective and potentially unreal as it is Polly who chooses what the audiences will see. The documentary as a part of Canadian filmmaking tradition is thus implied but challenged and violated at the same time.

The tension between realism and creativity (or subjectivity or fiction) is further stressed by the use of the medium of photography since it is ambiguous in the same way as the video confession. Photos taken by Polly can be considered as capturing reality but they are, at the same time, the self-expression of an artist who tries to express her ideas and feelings. Alemany-Galway asserts that the position of the photographs in the structure of *Mermaids* takes the form of "intertextual juxtapositions." While they may be thought of as a representation of the documentary approach and of picturing reality when they are considered individually, they may also be seen as representing the

opposite approach of questioning reality where they form a collage on the walls of Polly's flat, because collage becomes "a favoured device to present different constructions of reality, resulting in questioning of all such constructions" (Ulmer qtd. in Alemany-Galway, "Postmodernism" 34). While individual photographs indeed capture "real people and real places", their subsequent collage (just like photomontage) in Polly's flat creates a fictional place. The documentary tradition is thus stressed and challenged even further.

Interestingly enough, the expressiveness and creativity finally clash with realism and the documentary tradition also through Mary's glowing painting. When Polly smuggles the painting out of Gabrielle's flat and installs it in her office, it is noticed by an art critic who writes a laudatory critique that Gabrielle reads to Polly:

As in all her greatest writing... one feels here a fusion of the real with the visionary, and this one painting, through its inner glow and deep harmonies, comes closer to the effect of music than any painting this critic has ever seen, felt or heard.

The painting's "fusion of the real with the visionary" only further challenges the realism of Canadian documentary tradition. It primarily stresses the creativity on the part of both the author of the painting and the receiver of its message, who is expected to re-create it actively. The aspects of Canadian nature influenced by the documentary tradition are thus combined and set into contrast to creativity and the inner self, feelings, visions and dreams which are necessarily projected into any work of art, painting, photograph or movie no matter how realistic it is considered to be.

Apart from the testimonial or confessional function which enables Polly and the viewers to reveal Polly's psychic self, one can find another explanation for Polly's decision to video-tape herself: the need to socialize herself, to find a means by which she could communicate with people around her because she constantly fails in

communication by words. Polly leads an isolated life with her cat as the only companion. Her social relations include only people she meets during her temporal jobs and she does not seem to have any permanent friends with whom she spends her free time. Her social interactions are inept which may be illustrated by her interview with the curator in the gallery during which Polly not only answers to Gabrielle's questions timidly, but also fails to recognize the moment she is supposed to leave the office.

Curator: Well, I have a meeting right now. Why don't we call it a day and start tomorrow? At nine.

Polly: Nine? Oh, nine would be tremendous. ...

After this verbal exchange, Polly still sits for some seven or eight seconds before she finally realizes she is supposed to go. Her lack of experience in social communication and ineptness in various social situations is further stressed in the scene in Japanese restaurant where she is invited by the curator and offered a permanent part-time job. She is not accustomed to going out for lunch or dinner and her inexperience in similar situations is enhanced by the exotic type of the restaurant. When she comes prior to Gabrielle and is supposed to take her seat on the floor by a small table, she is completely at a loss about where to put her legs and her efforts to seat herself are rather comical. When Gabrielle arrives, she orders sake but Polly wants milk, cow's milk to be precise. As the curator probably regularly visits the restaurant, she orders her meal by a number, which Polly imitates by a random choice without looking into the menu. Her order then turns out to be a raw octopus with which she struggles with the help of chopsticks for the rest of the scene. Even though this scene is certainly a conscious exaggeration on the part of the filmmaker, it exemplifies and underlines Polly's social incompetence.

When Polly is finally betrayed by Gabrielle who was her ideal and whom she trusted, she also loses the only person with whom she could talk about her ideas. As

Shary suggests, Polly seems to want from Gabrielle what she expected from her boyfriends in the past: talk to her about all the things she thinks about sometimes, and all the things she's seen ("Present" 48). The turbulent events of the past hours of her life force Polly to look for somebody else to whom she could talk. Her newly gained artistic empowerment induces her to take the camcorder from the gallery and use it as a means of communication that is most natural to her; because she has instantly failed to properly communicate by words, she finds words to be an incredulous or imprecise means of communication and looks for another means of self-expression. She thus relies "upon the video images to depict the truth to us" (Shary, "Present" 48), and to properly communicate her ideas and perceptions with the hope to find somebody who would understand them.

The last aspect of video technology in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* I would like to touch upon is its use as a surveillance system and a means of obtaining information. When still installed in the gallery, the camcorder is placed in a television serving as a head of a sculpture. It is probably meant to watch people visiting the gallery and as such inherently bears the connotations of manipulation, control and surveillance. When Mary first occurs in the gallery, Polly is curious about her as she notices a sudden change of Gabrielle's behavior. Thanks to the camcorder Polly learns that Gabrielle and Mary were once lovers when she secretly watches and listens to their conversation on the video security monitor in her office. While the camcorder provides an access to information that would have otherwise remained hidden, it at the same time draws attention to its limits: the frame of vision is fixed and cannot be expanded. Therefore, when Gabrielle and Mary kiss out of the focus of the camcorder, Polly attempts to look around the corner in vain: the kiss remains a mystery. The surveillance camera is thus

portrayed as a medium of access but with a limited field of vision which allows for vacancies and inaccuracies (Shary, "Present" 44). Surveillance camera, or more generally video, is then presented as a medium which cannot capture everything, medium whose picture of reality is never complete and perfect.

The limits of the surveillance camera in the scene draw attention to a more fundamental problem of limits presented in *Mermaids*. As the viewers learn at the end of the film, Polly's own narration is mediated by the same video camera that she used for spying on Mary and Gabrielle's conversation. The limits implied by the scene thus reflect the limits of video technology as such: the spectators also cannot view everything from Polly's life they would like to, they cannot reach beyond the corner of the camera to access the omniscient truth of the story, they must rely on Polly's point of view and on her choice of scenes.

The Participating Viewer

Apart from creating the feeling of immediacy and authenticity, the video-taped scenes also establish an intimate relationship between the spectators and Polly, who, while narrating her story, looks directly into the camera and addresses those who are behind the apparatus. The spectators assume the place of an imaginary director of the home video and are consequently identified with the look of the video camera into which Polly looks. The intimacy is created by an almost eye-to-eye contact between the spectators and the main heroine.

Whether Polly aims her confession at some audiences behind the camera may not be apparently clear. Based on her solitary life one may argue that Polly does not necessarily need anyone: she is very shy in face-to-face communication with other people and it may be easier to confess her troubles to the video camera instead. Such a

confession may provide her with the necessary distance needed to cope with the events of the past days and also with what she supposes to be the lack of creative talent. She may also videotape herself simply because she is fascinated by images. There are, however, clues suggesting that Polly indeed attempts to communicate through the video screen with the presupposed spectators. When she prepares for her private video-taping session, she runs her fingers through her hair and is apparently anxious about her appearance in front of the camera as if suspecting some audiences to watch her. Later when her photos are rejected by the curator she invites the imaginary viewers to converse with her: “You know, how it can feel, uh... sort of all red and swollen especially late at night? Do you know what I mean? You don’t care how I felt. You just want to know what happens, don’t you?” Towards the ending of the movie she even smiles into the camera as if saying goodbye to the spectators who watched her with presumed sympathy. The answer may thus be twofold. While the videotaped narrative can serve as a means of relieving Polly’s conscience and she may direct it at herself because she feels the need to go through all the events again to gain a different perspective, it may on the other hand also serve as evidence of Polly’s development from a socially inept character to an individual who is capable of addressing people directly and look them into the eyes.

The imaginary eye-to-eye contact between Polly and spectators can, however, be created only rarely because even though Polly looks into the camera, her look is directed to the left of the viewer most of the time as if she wanted to avoid the direct look into the spectator’s eyes. By the direction of her look together with her subordinating placement of herself into the lower right corner of the frame, she “further emphasizes the confessional process she is going through” (Shary, “Present” 48). By looking away from the frame she evokes the feeling that she is ashamed of what she is

like, of what happened, and above all, of her presumed lack of creativity. Throughout her narrative, however, the place of her look and her way of looking change and at the end of the story Polly looks directly into the camera and consequently also into the eyes of the imagined confessors more often. The ending of the movie when Polly summarizes what happened so far is the moment when the spectators finally realize that Polly is not the same person she was at the beginning, shy and withdrawn, not able to properly communicate with people or to access the world of art. They are now able to see her as a mature and fully-developed artist who is able to create art on her own and to bear the consequences of what she has done. They come to realize that by splashing the tea into Gabrielle's face, into the face of the art critic, she finally managed to grasp her creative talent and accept her identity of an artist.

The intimacy between the viewer and Polly is slightly violated by the use of the double screen—the video screen within the cinematic (or televisual) one—even though these two screens are not visually marked by a frame of the video within the film which would destruct the intimacy completely. The double screen is combined with the direct address of the camera and this combination implies an opposite effect: it draws the viewers into the narrative and makes them identify with the main heroine very closely and, at the same time, it enables them to maintain a critical distance from her and evaluate her as well as her narrative from an objective distance. The function of video in *Mermaids* is thus enhanced even more: thanks to it, the viewers are allowed to share the most intimate moments of Polly and become her confessors but they can still keep a critical distance whose importance grows towards the end of the story when they finally need to piece the various clues provided during the narrative together and construct a coherent and meaningful story. The viewers' interpretation of the narrative and their ability to observe it closely allow for the understanding of all the minutest details in the

context of the whole narrative in which all its parts, the film, video and dream modes, finally find their place. The active participation of the viewer on the interpretation of the story is important in all films but its significance in *Mermaids* is crucial because the viewers are made aware of their selves being projected into the movie, or metaphorically into Mary's radiant painting. This self-projection into a work of art echoes McLuhan's thought that the content of any text, including his own, is the reader (Babe 297).

The necessity to be an active and reflective viewer is augured by the opening sequences of the movie in which the spectators first hear only Polly's voice before they are able to see her and they need to consider its meaning within the context of the otherwise conventional credit sequence (Moran 175). Polly does not need the credits to introduce herself, she is able to properly introduce herself through video. The beginning sequence also presents a contradiction to what follows. While she establishes herself as a controller of images and as an independent individual in the opening scene visually, she immediately afterwards begins to list her incompetencies (she is not a very good employee and is "organizationally impaired") and draws attention to her lower social status in comparison with that of her new boss. Only an active viewer is then able to decipher and interpret similar tensions, discrepancies and clues in the story.

Look at Me, Look with Me and Look at Yourself

Looks play an important role in *Mermaids* not only on the part of the spectators but also of the main heroine. By her direct address of the camera, Polly invites the viewers to look at her, to identify with her and reminds them of their act of viewing, of their voyeurism.

Even though Polly invites the spectators to look at her, she is not the object of the “male gaze” as Laura Mulvey defined it because even though she exposes herself to the look of the camera and consequently to the viewers’ ones, her screen image is not that of a sexual or erotic object of male’s desires (Austin-Smith 214). One of the reasons may be found in the fact that Polly is not a particularly attractive character, either in her appearance or in her way of life. However, she is neither a loser as some of the critics argued because even though she lives by herself and is quite isolated, she does not pity herself and does not invite pity from others.¹⁰ Throughout the movie, she is described as a rather asexual character, who even though she had some boyfriends in the past, may not have any sexual experience at all. Neither is there any evidence that she feels a real, physical sexual desire for someone. Her “null sexuality,” as Brenda Austin-Smith calls it, was apparently a deliberate choice as the director wanted a character, with whom both the female and the male spectators could easily identify. Polly’s portrayal is undoubtedly a departure from the eroticization of female figures in mainstream cinema because she is not being exposed to the gaze of the camera and consequently of the spectators as a fetish (Austin-Smith 217). If aura is defined as the oscillation between distance and proximity, Polly’s image on the screen may rather be described as an auratic experience. The proximity in this case may be interpreted as the illusion of closeness between Polly and the viewers and the distance as the actual barriers dividing them. Polly invites the viewers to look at the image of herself and observe other images that she chooses to show them. She is in many ways the “ultimate spectator” and the voyeur because looking is one of her primary activities and her look directs the looking practices of the spectators (Shary, “Present” 48).

¹⁰ This attitude is exemplified for example by Geoff Pevere who pointed out that Canadian stories are traditionally stories of losers, with characters failing to achieve their goals. He saw *Mermaids* as the best possible example, “an account of alienation” and “a form of madness” (Alemany-Galway, “Postmodern” 27).

Polly can, indeed, be seen as “a species of voyeur” as Brenda Austin-Smith confirms (225). However, she cannot be considered a voyeur that appropriates the male gaze, the kind of voyeur who “invades private worlds by watching and looking, either directly or through lens, objectifying these worlds in the process” as described by Marion Harrison, who further equals Polly’s look with the male gaze. Polly does not possess the power which is associated with the male gaze. She rather portrays herself as a constrained and shy bachelorette who is “clumsy and awkward under the gaze of the curator” during her interview in the gallery (Godwin 24). Her instant looking may be the result of her inability to properly communicate with people around her or, as Godwin suggests, a way of learning from the outside world (24). When she spies on a young couple lying on a blanket in the grass and kissing, she probably only wants to see the magical kiss that she missed when Gabrielle and Mary kissed in the gallery before. She is not aggressive when looking at them, only clumsily curious.

The omnipresence of looking and seeing can also be considered a strategy of the filmmaker who thus “prevents us from escaping into the anonymity we usually enjoy as ‘meta-voyeurs’ of a film” (Godwin 23). The viewers cannot enjoy the story from the safety of their cinema seats to which they may be accustomed in mainstream movies. Not only are they invited to look *at* the main heroine during the video confession scenes, they are also invited to identify with her point of view and must “align [themselves] with Polly’s look” (Godwin 23) and thus also look with her on the images she herself observes (Godwin 23). While mainstream movies usually try to hide the voyeurism of spectators whom they encourage to lose themselves in the fictional world, *Mermaids* exposes the looks and reminds the viewers of their act of viewing.

Several kinds of looks belong to Polly and consequently also to the viewers. Apart from the already mentioned look connected with her narrative authority and

subjectivity (e.g. the look by which she secretly observes Gabrielle), there are two other kinds of looking. The first one is represented by her visions or fantasies by which she allows the viewers to peep into her inner life, and the second one by her photographs of people and buildings (Austin-Smith 223). These kinds of looks further refute the argument of some critics who equaled Polly's way of looking with the male gaze—Polly does not use looking and images which are the product of her looking to control or possess somebody. The multiplicity of Polly's looks may rather reveal the multiplicity in Polly's personality as Alemany-Galway suggests ("Postmodernism" 33), or may serve as a means of accessing her inner self and the world around her, means of communication or of achieving pleasure. Looking and seeing in the movie also draw attention to the ubiquity of images not only within the movie but importantly also in our everyday life.

3.5 From Singing Mermaids to Artistic Autonomy

The previous part of the thesis discussed the use of the media of video and film within the movie's structure. As already mentioned, there is a third level incorporated into the story: the dream sequences when Polly indulges in her fantasies. These scenes do not drive the plot, rather, they make the portrait of Polly complete and stress the importance of one of Polly's characteristics—her vivid imagination and specifically her fascination with images, which makes her what Brenda Austin-Smith calls an "asexual dreamer, vulnerable to complete identification with images" (228). Apart from complementing the picture of Polly, the dreaming scenes which are incorporated into four stages of Polly's narrative also define how she perceives the world (Mayne qtd. in Shary, "Present" 43). More importantly, however, they also emphasize and reflect her

development and change of her personality which takes place primarily in the film mode.

The dreaming does not occur when Polly is fast asleep during the night. Her dreams or visions into which she is completely immersed appear during the day and are always provoked by a visual cue, especially by an image she finds fascinating. The first two dream sequences in which Polly climbs onto a skyscraper and the one in which she walks on water with Gabrielle are evoked by her own photos. Polly's attention is ceased by some of her photographs she made earlier that day and she transfers herself from her bathroom where she develops the photos into the image. In the first vision Polly climbs up a skyscraper with hand-held suction cups and a maple leaf on her cap. Suddenly, the cups slip and Polly is falling off the building when she discovers she can fly like a kind of Canadian superhero equivalent to the American Superman. As Shary suggests this fantasy when Polly at first falls and then saves herself seems to reflect her feelings about her new job at the gallery ("Present" 43).

The second and third visions then represent her growing empowerment and self-confidence. In the second one, Polly and Gabrielle walk on water together (thus becoming equal) while Polly gives Gabrielle a lecture on Freud's theory of polymorphous perversity (Shary, "Present" 43) and at the same time questions the legitimacy of its name by calling it "a most natural state" instead. In this vision, Polly sees herself as very "intelligent and enlightened" as opposed to the first one in which she was a mere dreamer.

The third vision further confirms Polly's development but in a slightly different way than Shary argues. He sees the increasing empowerment of Polly in the third fantasy in the fact that Polly discovers a world of her own by riding an empty bus and having a picnic by the sea where she listens to singing mermaids ("Present" 43). This

scene, however, marks a different kind of development of the main heroine. The fantasy follows Gabrielle's birthday party where Polly for the first time saw what she then considered to be Gabrielle's painting. She is so fascinated by its beauty that she can not resist and takes the painting at home with her. There, in the privacy of her apartment, she indulges into the third dream. The difference between the two previous ones and the third lies in the fact that the latter is not inspired by her photograph only but partly by Mary's painting as well. It can, therefore, be interpreted as a struggle between Polly's internal self, between the dreaming Polly, and her growing artistic empowerment projected onto the blank canvas. Visually, the third fantasy is still the same as the two preceding ones: it is black-and-white and with a slightly grainy picture.

The last vision, however, is completely different both in its visual presentation and also in its theme which suggest that the internal struggle for self-discovery draws to the end. The fourth vision not only further confirms Polly's empowerment, it also stresses her independence and artistic creativity. It is inspired solely by Mary's painting and is also visually different from the preceding fantasies: it is half in the black-and-white and grainy picture and half in colour—half in the dream mode and half in the filmic one. The last dream sequence takes place in the gallery where Polly finally learns the truth about the author of the painting. When she is left alone after she splashed a hot tea into Gabrielle's face, she hears music and has a vision of being a conductor of an orchestra, thus finally grasping the power over her life into her own hands and becoming an independent person and artist. She stands in front of Mary's illuminated white canvas, filling the work with her own image, and conducts the orchestra which she imagines in front of her. The viewers are provided with two distinct images which illustrate the division between reality and illusion: the image of Polly shot by the filmic camera (in colour) is inter-cut with the black-and-white image of the orchestra at which

the viewers look from Polly's point of view, as if by Polly's eyes. Consequently, these cross-cutting sequences divide Polly from her dream: Polly and the orchestra are never shown in one shot. By combining her dream with reality, Polly finally establishes her identity and achieves an internal balance in which her dreaming self, innocent, childlike and vulnerable, merges with her newly gained self of a self-aware and autonomous artist who is the creator and controller of images. This is further stressed by Polly being framed within the illuminated white canvas onto which she symbolically projects herself, her creativity and point of view. When she finally takes the video camera from the gallery, taking possession of the apparatus of the look as Godwin asserts, and video-tapes herself, she creates her first independent "composition", her video-confession (Shary, "Present" 49). While she would probably never dreamt of shooting such a video when she first entered the gallery, she is no longer ashamed of her creative potential and is able to bear the look of others without being nervous. Her achievement is symbolically applauded by the orchestra at the end of the last dream sequence (Shary, "Present" 49).

Narrative resolution

"That's what happened. So I guess I'll be, I'll be going away now," concludes Polly her video narrative. There is a knock on the door and Gabrielle and Mary enter Polly's flat. Mary notices the photographs on the walls and both women realize the photos sent to the gallery by Little Penelope were in fact Polly's. Gabrielle apologizes and Polly invites both women to see some more of her photos. Gabrielle and Mary accept and follow Polly by an open door into a beautiful forest, the world of her imagination.

Many theoreticians interpret the ending as “a reconciliation of the three women as a vision of an artistic and sexual utopia in which all differences and difficulties are transcended in a feminist burst of colour and foliage” and further argue that instead of replacing her private look with a more public one she retreats “even further into her home, her privacy and her imagination” (Austin-Smith 228). The ending can be, however, viewed from a larger perspective because it fuses the three narrative lines and thus also merges what they represent: Polly’s video narration proving her artistic authority, the film describing Polly’s development and her journey to gain the artistic authority, and her dreams allowing the viewers to access Polly’s inner self. When the three women talk in Polly’s kitchen, it is the video camera that frames the scene. A cross-cut to a credit sequence disrupts the narrative line and the subsequent shot shows Polly opening the door to her imagination. This shot is still framed by the camcorder but turned left to capture the door which was out of focus in the preceding shot, but there is no explanation for who turned it. Moreover, the picture is no longer grainy as in previous scenes captured by the camcorder and has the quality of the film settings. The film thus closes by merging of the three narrative lines not only thematically but also visually. Therefore, equaling the ending of the story with only one of the narrative lines can be rather misguided. The ending needs to be interpreted from a larger perspective—as the ending of a long journey towards self-discovery and self-recognition. While Polly certainly remains a kind of a dreamer indulging in her fantasies, she finally manages to communicate her feelings, ideas and perceptions not only to the viewers but also to Gabrielle and Mary who are in the end able to appreciate Polly’s talent, as Gabrielle’s look full of astonishment and disbelief in the closing scene confirms. It is Polly who is self-aware of her talent and power, she is the artist and creator. She proves this twice in the end of the narrative—it is Polly for the first time in the story who initiates the social

contact between the three women when she invites them to see more of her photos and thus confirms her growing empowerment in their relationship. When she for the last time smiles into the video camera and then switches it off, she proves her power over images and over the narrative for the second time. The viewers are thus reminded that it was her who allowed them to peer into her life. It is her again who decides it is the time to leave them out.

Conclusion

I've Heard the Mermaids Singing proves how the employment of technologies and media (especially video and photograph) within the film structure can change the reception of a movie. Thanks to the use of video within the film, Rozema creates an almost eye-to-eye contact between the spectators and the main heroine and thus also achieves to create a very close, even intimate, relationship between them. Moreover, thanks to connotations like domesticity, immediateness or reality which are usually associated with video, the viewers are drawn into the narrative even more. For an hour and twenty minutes, Polly becomes a member of their families who guides them through her narrative and watches it with them.

As regards the employment of technologies on the level of the narrative itself, its use is very personal as well. They do not serve as a means of gaining power or control over somebody, nor as a tool helping to resolve a conflict within family or more broadly within a part of the society. This may also be the reason why so many feminist critics dismissed the movie for not addressing the issue of lesbianism or feminism sufficiently—*Mermaids* is not aimed at achieving grand changes in the society, it is much more modest. It tries to draw attention to the omnipresence of images in our life and to their significance for each of us. Images can be a means of expression of one's

thoughts, ideas and feelings, means of communication with the outside world when words do not suffice, a kind of therapy which may enable one to gain distance from one's life and thus achieve personal satisfaction and professional recognition. Furthermore, they can serve as a means of education and gaining knowledge and experience from the outside world through sight. The position of the movie towards technology and media is thus overwhelmingly positive, it stresses the advantages they can provide to each of us rather than warning against the dangers involved. There are only some hints referring to dangers connected with technology. The first can be seen in the danger of over-identification with images and losing touch with people, or losing one's place in the society completely. This danger is, however, counterbalanced with advantages of finding a world of dreams which becomes the source and result of artistic creativity. Another danger which is pointed out to lies in the limits that are inherent to technology and media which cannot be equaled to a direct experience because they cannot provide a complete picture of reality and consequently cannot supply for real experience either.

When Polly looks for the last time into the video camera, creates her last close-up on the screen and turns the camera off, the viewers come to realize that even though they accepted Polly into their families and witnessed her private intimate confession, she will continue to "live" separately because she does not have a permanent existence outside the screen. She thus reminds the spectators that what they have just seen is only a story. At this moment she becomes only an image on the screen liable to their own interpretations and projection of themselves into it, image which may mean everything one wants it to mean, just like Mary's blank painting.

4. Conclusion: Mediating the Self

The detailed analyses of *Family Viewing* by Atom Egoyan and *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* by Patricia Rozema in previous two chapters showed that media and technologies can be employed in a myriad of ways and convey multiplicity of meanings. The aim of this chapter is to summarize the various roles of media in the two films and set them into a wider context of Canadian society and the theoretical discourse related to media.

Atom Egoyan set media in *Family Viewing* into the context of a family whose members serve as archetypes of characters one encounters in everyday life. His treatment of technologies, therefore, has implications on a broader level of the whole society which is composed from such family units. The archetypical characters, living in the environment flooded by mediated images, reflect two of the theories of the Canadian media prophet, Marshall McLuhan: the theory of archetypes which McLuhan took over from Northrop Frye and applied it to media, and “the medium is the message” theory. People in the movie become archetypes because they are not able to decode the true meaning of the media images around them—it is not the content of these media that is important but the effect these media have on people, on the society. By not being aware of this, people allow technology to turn them into schematic and trivial beings. As McLuhan writes:

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of the social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the media work as environments. (McLuhan, *The Medium* 26)

This is indeed a threatening vision of media as proposed by McLuhan and embodied in *Family Viewing*. For example Stan is so overwhelmed and penetrated by

technologies that he becomes completely determined by them and turns to a mere archetype. When summarizing *Family Viewing*, it can thus be argued that those aspects of media in the movie that are negative partly echo McLuhan's critical stance towards technology.

A solution to this menace is, according to McLuhan, possible. It lies in "arranging the entire human environment as a work of art, as a teaching machine designed to maximize perception and to make everyday learning a process of discovery" (McLuhan, *The Medium* 68). And this is exactly the message of *Mermaids*. *Mermaids* thus complements *Family Viewing* and emphasizes the importance of a creative mind which is able to look at one thing from different angles and employ "multiple models of exploration" (McLuhan, *The Medium* 69). This ability helps the main heroine to overcome determinism around her. Only after she grasps her creativity and becomes aware of the freedom of her soul is she able to reach a balance between her inner self and the life among other people, within the society. Moreover, she manages to "liberate" others (especially Gabrielle) from their rigid ways of seeing and a "fixed point of view" (McLuhan, *The Medium* 68). Therefore, Rozema embodies McLuhan's idea that the artist is "indispensable in the shaping and analysis and understanding of the life of forms, and structures created by electric technology" (McLuhan, *Understanding* 65).

The role of the artist is important not only in McLuhan's theory but seems to stand out very prominently in the Canadian thinking in general because there are many other Canadian theorist of communication, media, literature and film, who mention it in their writings. For example, Alemany-Galway characterizes Canadian cinema with the help of Margaret Atwood's theory of four "Victim Positions" which she outlined in her book *Survival*. Alemany-Galway maintains that it is the fourth Atwood's position that

characterizes the Canadian postmodern cinema: that of a “creative non-victim” (*A Postmodern* 103). Also other theorists emphasize the role of the artist in the modern, extremely mediated, world. Robert E. Babe in his book *Canadian Communication Thought* provided a summary of and commentary on the most important Canadian communication theorists¹¹ and their views of the role of the artist summarized in the following way:

Most of these writers affirm that humans possess or can attain an intrinsic freedom, a capacity to overcome (with help, perhaps) the determinism around and about – whether these be technological or ideological. [...] Many of our theorists look to the artist as being of vital assistance in liberating people from technological and ideological determinism, and many point to education. (Babe 316)

By embodying of McLuhan’s ideal, *Mermaids* provides a possible solution for people determined by technologies: they should liberate themselves from the determining influence of technologies by becoming artists, people who are able to create and consequently look on things from various angles. *Family Viewing*, on the other hand, is not pre-occupied with seeking a similar solution in the form of the liberation of one’s mind. Instead, Egoyan forces his characters to consider their relationship to technologies and accept one of the positions towards them he outlines.

The polarity of positions towards media as represented in *Family Viewing* also reflects McLuhan’s theory and in particular the term “*chiasmus*” he coined. “*Chiasmus*” means that high intensity changes a medium’s effect. He illustrates this point on the example of vision which is usually associated with continuity but in a highly visually intensive era like that of today’s world, “it fosters logic (rationality), empiricism, dissection and fragmentation” (Babe 285). Media in the film are presented as a highly complicated phenomenon that influences one’s life both positively and negatively, while even seemingly negative aspects may turn to the opposite and vice versa.

¹¹ These theorists include Graham Spry, Harold Innis, John Grierson, Dallas W. Smythe,

For example even a painful memory stored on a videotape can, even though artificially, supply for a real event and enable one to cope with the loss of a beloved person. Thus, in the logic of *chiasmus* Egoyan balances on the boundary between the positive and negative effects, refusing any definite judgment over media and condemning them to ambiguous or even contradictory interpretations.

Patricia Rozema's employment of technologies, as illustrated above, is slightly different, especially as regards the overall outcomes and implications. She does not use them in order to solve a conflict within family or society, her employment of media is more personal and very closely tied with the main heroine for whom they become tools of self-expression and self-reflection. It is the medium and the fact that media can mediate the self and influence us that is important for her.

Other examples of McLuhan's theory reflected in both movies could certainly be found but this is not the aim of the thesis. By drawing the parallels between the films, the writings of McLuhan and some other Canadian theorists I have demonstrated that the themes addressed by the two films and described above are recurrent within the Canadian context and therefore important for the Canadian discourse.

Apart from the themes regarding the questions related to media already discussed, there are some more with which both Egoyan and Rozema are pre-occupied, even though they often imply different meanings.

Egoyan's movie draws attention to the surveillance aspect of media which can become a dangerous means of control in the sense of Foucault's Panopticon.

A surveillance camera is also present in *Mermaids* but Rozema works with it not in the sense of controlling the people around but in the sense of learning from the outside

world through the lenses. So while Egoyan sets the media within the power relations of a family and consequently the whole society, Rozema uses them for gaining knowledge, experience, pleasure and professional recognition. Media can in Rozema's thinking become the tool of self-expression and achieving the balance between the internal self and the external world.

Egoyan also touches upon the aspect of media connected with pleasure but adopts a different perspective. As for Rozema, media for him can serve as a means of achieving pleasure but not the one gained through creative self-expression but rather through their use as a fetish. Among other things, he addresses the question of whether it is possible to reach true experience through media (mediation) or whether media can supply for memory but he does not offer any simple or determinate solution and leaves these questions open.

Another common theme that can be found in both movies is that of a medium serving as a means of communication, theme that is significant not only for the two films but plays an important role also in the current discussions within the new media theories. In *Family Viewing*, Stan tries to communicate with his son through artificial formulae he learned from television. Van takes this type of communication over and applies it to Armen with whom he attempts to communicate through nature films on television and video tapes from his childhood. Rather than communicating the intended meaning, however, video apparatus in *Family Viewing* fails to transmit the message and therefore necessarily fails as the medium of interpersonal communication. Rozema's thinking is the complete contrary: video camera and photographs are the only means by which Polly manages to properly communicate with the outside world. She is thus very positive regarding the question of mediation replacing face-to-face communication. Unlike Egoyan, she seems to believe that mediated images can communicate the proper

meaning. It is not to say though that Egoyan is, when compared to Rozema, overwhelmingly sceptical about media. Rather, he is preoccupied with both the positive and the negative qualities associated with them and leaves the viewers to decide for themselves which position to take. Media for him have both positive and negative uses, while the boundary between the two is very ambiguous. Rozema, on the other hand, leaves quite an unambiguous message—media can become the tools of communication and self-expression in the hands of an artist or anyone who has a creative potential.

Egoyan's movie seems to be more complex and full of contradictions regarding the use and influence of media technologies than Rozema's *Mermaids*. The play of contradictory forces can, however, be found in both of them. While Egoyan based his film on the contradictory aspects of media, Rozema works with contradictions on the level of Canadian identity and its forming influences. This topic will be discussed in detail towards the end of the chapter.

In many ways, *Family Viewing* and *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* can be indeed considered exemplary movies of Canadian cinema, and reflections of Canadian thinking in general. Both films address the theme of technologies which seems to be very important for Canadians especially due to the vastness of landscape, spare population and the need to overcome long distances (Grierson qtd. in Babe 25). Moreover, they deal with it in such a way which reflects the thinking of Canadian media theorists and cultural thinkers. Apart from that, there are other features that which can be called typically Canadian, features that are especially related to the formal aspects of both movies.

The formal structure of both *Family Viewing* and *Mermaids* is very similar. They draw attention to the cinematic language and do not let the viewers immerse into

the narrative without reminding them that what they see is a kind of reality constructed from disparate images. This strategy is opposite to the mainstream cinema which mostly allows the audiences to identify with the main hero and lose themselves in the story. In *Family Viewing* and *Mermaids*, the spectators need to follow not only the pictures they see on the screen but also the frames into which they are set so that they can decode the meaning and reach beyond the surface (Tschofen and Burwell 16). The fragmentation is achieved especially by the use of montage-like style which poses various media and their images next to each other. The media thus become crucial for both the thematic and formal level of the films.

Eisenstein was the first filmmaker whose concept and use of montage influenced other directors and, according to Alemany-Galway, the postmodern cinema as such (Alemany-Galway, *A Postmodern* 26). Atom Egoyan uses this technique to enhance the ironic moments in *Family Viewing* by juxtaposing film situations with television images in the nursing home. Similarly, Rozema contrasts different realities presented in the video and film settings. Both *Family Viewing* and *Mermaids* can therefore be considered postmodern: by creating metadiegeses within the films' structures, they reject universal truths and outcomes and their meanings need to be interpreted by each viewer individually based on their individual knowledge, experience and projection of one's emotions. This is certainly not a significant difference from other films as each movie needs to be interpreted individually. The main difference lies in the fact that neither Egoyan nor Rozema define the final meanings or outcomes, they only provide various clues and clashes which need to be reconciled by each viewer individually. The endings as well as the various contradictions are thus left open. In this respect, both movies can certainly be considered postmodern.

Apart from these functions, montage serves as an ideal tool for exploration of contradictions in both movies. Each of them, however, uses its own sets of contradictory forces.

As suggested earlier, Egoyan primarily works with contradictory uses and influences of media on people and shows that while they can be used for evil purposes, they can also help people and become a source relief. Moreover, there are other contradictions explored in *Family Viewing*. An adolescent boy needs to choose his way of life and struggles against his father's influence and values. He is furthermore trapped between two cultures: the WASP culture of Canada and the ethnic Armenian culture, which is also a part of him. Finally, he balances on the verge of reality and mediation.

I've Heard the Mermaids Singing provides a similar clash of contradictions. First and foremost, it juxtaposes imaginary realities and dream sequences with the autobiographical form of the narrative. The autobiographical form further points out to the Canadian documentary art-form, a tradition which is not only alluded to but also challenged. One of the most important contrasts is also the tension relating to the definition of the self. The self of the main heroine is divided into two parts, the first one being defined from the inside (the inner world) and the other one from the outside (the society). These two selves are divided between the film and video-settings, and are blurred and merged towards the ending of the movie as Polly slowly reaches a balance. Finally, the clash of the Canadian culture with the typical American symbols is foregrounded: for example, *Mermaids* challenges the Hollywood ideal of a beautiful heroine and appropriates the American superman to the Canadian context (Poly flying over Toronto). Certainly, the list of contradictory forces is not complete, it rather represents the most evident examples.

The play of contradictions can be considered typically Canadian as confirmed by Catherine Monk, who argues that ambiguity and multiplicity of contradictory forces in movies is typically Canadian because it reflects the “multitude of people, rainbow belief systems and a cacophony of voices” (108). The two films, with both their thematic and formal levels, thus fit in the characterization of Canadian cinema as outlined by Catherine Monk in her book *Weird Sex & Snowshoes* in which she analyzed some of the most famous Canadian movies with respect to Canadian culture and identity. In her opinion, the Canadian film is

non-linear and fragmented; it prefers to tell stories through layers rather than straight lines; it revels in opposition and twin-mirror imagery; it is concerned with themes of alienation and has a tendency to show us the negative space around the subject to express character rather than indulge in contrived dramatic dialogue to articulate a specific meaning. (Monk 106)

Moreover, the number of contradictions and clashing forces presented in both movies also seem to echo the conclusion which Robert E. Babe reached in his book *Canadian Communication Thought*. His detailed study of the lives and theories of the founders of Canadian communication and media thought, like Innis, Grierson, Smythe, Grant, Fry and McLuhan showed that there is one common principle governing the Canadian thinking and identity—the principle of *dialectics*, which is found in the theories of all the Canadian thinkers he mentions. He defines the term in the following way:

Dialectical concepts and processes entail the clash or tensions of opposites, out of which issues either a new synthesis or, at the very least, a balance or equilibrium. Dialectical logic sees contradiction as the primary means whereby higher truths are attained, and judges standard or analytical logic to be unduly static and rigid. When the term is applied to the phenomenal world, dialecticians claim that events, and indeed history, are largely the result of the interaction of contradictory forces. (Babe 28)

Robin Mathews summarizes the relationship between Canadiannes and dialectical forces similarly: “Canadian identity lives in a process of tension and

argument, a conflict of opposites which often stalemate, often are forced to submit compromise” [...] (qtd. in Babe 27). Dialectics is reflected in both *Family Viewing* and *Mermaids* and also in their treatment of the phenomena reflecting the Canadian culture and critical thought as described above. Both *Family Viewing* and *Mermaids* foreground especially those contradictory forces which in some ways relate to Canada and the thinking of Canadians. Rather than doing away with them, however, both directors stress them and leave them open. It is finally up to the audiences to decide which position they choose or if they let the contradictory forces create “a new synthesis.”

To conclude, Egoyan’s *Family Viewing* and Rozema’s *I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing* employ media on the thematic and formal levels of the narratives. Their uses reflect the various positions people can assume towards them and stress their importance within the Canadian cultural context. The two movies thus not only represent a part of the mosaic of the Canadian perspective on the issues related to technologies but they also have broader implications: on their basis, everyone can reconsider their own relationship towards media and re-assess the influence which they have on their lives.

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English Résumé

The aim of the Diploma Thesis “Mediating the Self: Employment of Media in *Family Viewing* and *I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing*” is to analyze and compare how Atom Egoyan and Patricia Rozema, respectively, present their visions related to media and technologies in one of their movies. Among the topics the thesis primarily deals with is the relationship and attitude of the characters towards media, the various uses of media in the life of an individual, the outcomes of the interaction between and co-existence of the characters and media, and also mediation of the self with the help of a medium apparatus.

The first chapter of the thesis covers a brief sketch of the history and development of media, general introduction to the theories of new media and the current questions addressed by various media theories. The end of the chapter is devoted to the relationship of media to the Canadian cultural context and to the formation of Canadian identity.

Chapters two and three respectively, present detailed thematic and formal analyses of *Family Viewing* and *Mermaids*. The introductory parts of both chapters include a brief biographical background of the filmmakers and an overview of their filmography. The analyses themselves then address especially the questions related to media and technologies as described above. Another significant part of these chapters discuss the issue of the viewer’s position and involvement in both movies.

The concluding chapter is devoted to the comparison of the two movies with respect of their employment of media and the meanings conveyed. It concentrates on drawing analogies and contrasts between the two movies, and importantly also on the search for links to various media theories and related theories that are of some relevance

for the given topic. The thesis concludes by an attempt to situate the two movies into the Canadian context and thinking.

České resumé

Cílem diplomové práce „Mediating the Self: Employment of Media in *Family Viewing* and *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*“ je analyzovat a poté porovnat pohled dvou významných kanadských režisérů Atoma Egoyana a Patricie Rozemy na témata spojená s médii a technologiemi tak, jak je tito tvůrci prezentovali ve svých filmech „Rodinný pohled“ (*Family Viewing*) a „Zpěv sirén“ (*I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*). Mezi nejdůležitější témata patří vztah jednotlivých postav k médiím, využití médií v jejich životě, důsledky koexistence a vzájemné interakce a mezi postavami a médii a v neposlední řadě také reprezentace vlastního já pomocí média.

První kapitola práce předkládá stručnou historii a vývoj médií, obecný úvod do teorií spojených s novými médii a otázky a problémy, jimiž se současné mediální teorie zabývají. Závěr této kapitoly je věnován vztahu médií a kulturního kontextu Kanady a také utváření kanadské identity.

Kapitoly dvě a tři obsahují podrobnou tematickou a formální analýzu vybraných filmů. Úvody těchto kapitol stručně popisují autobiografie režisérů a přehled jejich filmů. Vlastní analytické části se poté podrobně zabývají otázkami a problémy, které se vztahují k použití médií a technologií ve vybraných filmech tak, jak je popsáno výše. Významnou součástí těchto analytických kapitol je také postavení diváka ve struktuře každého z filmů.

Závěrečná, čtvrtá, kapitola práce se věnuje srovnání obou filmů zejména s ohledem na jejich využití médií a na významy, které z tohoto využití plynou. Kromě hledání podobných rysů a rozdílů mezi filmy se v této kapitole také zabývám společnými prvky těchto filmů s různými mediálními teoriemi a také jinými teoriemi, které jsou pro dané téma relevantní. Závěr práce je pokusem oba filmy situovat v rámci kanadského kontextu a myšlení.