

**Drama in the Ring and on the Ice:  
An Exploration of Atom Egoyan's Canadian Broadcasting  
Corporation (CBC) Television Productions**

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### Abstract

Film director Atom Egoyan's oeuvre includes two CBC television productions--the 1985 hour-long drama, *In This Corner* and the 1992 made-for-television movie, *Gross Misconduct*. This essay examines several aspects of the productions that challenged the normal conventions of 1980's and 1990's television along with critical and audience reaction to them.

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Known predominantly for his work in the feature film milieu, Atom Egoyan has, on occasion, also ventured into the televisual realm both as a director and as a writer. Egoyan's television credits include two Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) productions--the 1985 hour-long drama, *In This Corner* and the 1992 made-for-television movie, *Gross Misconduct*.<sup>1</sup>

In *Dramatic Choices: A Report on Canadian English-Language Drama*, Trina McQueen notes that Canadian drama is not only distinguished by its "...distinctive voice" but also that it represents "... two very different traditions." According to McQueen, the first tradition is embodied in popular series such as *King of Kensington*, *Beachcomers*, *Due South*, and *The Kids of Degrassi Street*. The second tradition represents the "... the melding of the documentary and the fictional in movies and mini-series" (2). *In This Corner* and *Gross Misconduct*--both directed by Egoyan and written by fellow Canadian Paul Gross--exemplify this second tradition. Using sports as their backdrop (i.e., boxing and hockey respectively) both productions employ a variety of devices to frame the stories which challenged the normal conventions of 1980's and 1990's television (*Gross Misconduct* arguably to a larger extent than *In This Corner*). These devices serve as the focal point of this essay.

The first section of the essay provides an overview and broadcast history of each production followed by a brief discussion of the major themes shared by both productions. Building upon this foundation, the essay's next section examines the unconventional devices used in the productions. Specifically, it will address the following questions: a) How were the devices used in the productions? b) How did the devices differ from their conventional counterparts? c) What was Egoyan's rationale for using the various devices? and finally, d) What was the critical and audience reaction to the devices? The essay concludes with a discussion about the inherent tension in television between the desires of innovators like Egoyan to extend

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beyond televisual norms and the broadcasters' need to reach a mass audience.

**For the Record & In This Corner**

Ryan Shaw: "*Do you like fighting Terry?*"

Terry Dunne: "*Yeah usually...it's just an extension of the world around me. You know? The combat's distilled but ... I can see it in the subways. Shopping malls.*"

Ryan Shaw: "*A little country between fear and anger.*"

Terry Dunne: "**That's where I live.**" (*In This Corner*).

*"Are you a killer?"* -- Terry Dunne to Ryan Shaw (*In This Corner*).

*In This Corner* was originally intended to air as an installment of *For the Record* anthology series.<sup>2</sup> *For the Record* showcased some of Canada's foremost actors, directors, and writers in hour-long, and occasionally, 90-minute docudramas. The series aired on the CBC between 1977 and 1985 with four or five programs typically produced each season. Productions included in the series focused "on major political, social, business or cultural issues" such as euthanasia and the demise of the family farm. *For the Record's* focus upon "hot," albeit often controversial, topics of the day made it prone to almost continuous attacks from individuals and groups associated with its targeted subjects, ranging "... from banks to provincial premiers" (McQueen 2-3).

Sig Gerber, *For the Record's* executive producer from 1983 to 1986 points out that "...quite unlike the shock-based, sensationalistic American TV movies of the week," *For the Record* "... aimed to inform, educate and entertain. The series was, in many respects, the product of Canada's documentary film tradition. 'We had to entertain, but we were there to provoke and challenge and to get viewers to think about social issues'" (qtd. in Eichorn).

However, the CBC's 1985 cancellation of the *For the Record* series forced *In This Corner* to air on the network in February 1986 without the *For the Record* name in its credits. Nonetheless, the production shared the trademark characteristics of its *For the Record* predecessors.

At the time producer Alan Burke recruited Atom Egoyan to direct the CBC production, Egoyan was characterized in the press as a "cerebral" up-and-coming Canadian feature film director with his recent completion of the theatrical feature *Next of Kin* which premiered in 1984 (Harris C3).<sup>3</sup> During this same period, *In This Corner's* scriptwriter, Paul Gross, was gaining notoriety within Canadian theatrical circles as an innovative playwright while also becoming known for his acting work on stage and television in Canada.<sup>4</sup> However, for both Egoyan and Gross, the respective roles of director and scriptwriter in a television production proved somewhat new territory for both men.

True to the *For the Record* legacy of probing unflinchingly into topics that other series would likely avoid or, at best, "sugar coat," *In This Corner* took a thought-provoking look at terrorism and its impact upon the terrorist and his/her victims. In a February 1, 1986 *Globe and Mail Broadcast Week* article, Bill Prentice summarized *In This Corner's* plot as follows:

Robert Wisden stars as Terry Dunne, a young amateur boxer whose prowess in the ring brings him to the brink of the Canadian championship. If he wins, he'll go on to his first international bout - a dream he's cherished through the long years of grueling training. As an added bonus, the match will be held in Ireland, his ancestral home.

While preparing for the championship, he's approached by some of his Irish supporters and asked to smuggle Ryan Shaw (Patrick Tierney), an Irish Republican Army (IRA) terrorist, back into Ireland disguised as part of his coaching team. The subsequent plot, laced with betrayal and murder, probes the psyches of the two young men, both of whom have had to develop their killer instincts (P11).

*In This Corner* dared to question core long-standing assumptions about terrorists and terrorism. In a *Winnipeg Free Press* review, Doreen Martens describes *In This Corner's* play upon the terrorist stereotype:

Terrorists are unmitigated, unexplainable evil. The terrorist still wears a jet black hat in a world where morality has succumbed to the gray subtleties of relativism. The terrorist is today's unassailably perfect bad guy. Few plotlines bother to suggest there might be an intelligent or believable rationale for the tactics used by terrorist organizations. And that is what sets *In This Corner* apart (Martens 26).

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Moreover, adds Martens, “There’s something strangely likable about the terrorist, Ryan Shaw (Patrick Tierney)” (26).

**Gross Misconduct: The Life of Brian “Spinner” Spencer**

***"It's a tough road, boys, no question. But as I see it, this is your choice. You can stay here and die here ... or you can play hockey"*** -- Roy Spencer to his sons Brian and Byron  
(*Gross Misconduct*, January 1992 draft script with working title *On Thin Ice or The Life of Brian Spencer in Twenty Eight Scenes*).

Approximately seven years after the production of *In This Corner*, the director-writer-producer trio of Egoyan, Gross, and Burke once again were reunited for a second CBC production. This time around, they would collaborate on *Gross Misconduct*, a made-for-television movie based on the on the life and death of Canadian hockey player Brian “Spinner” Spencer.

Brian “Spinner” Spencer, the individual upon whom *Gross Misconduct* was based, was described as "... a hockey player of small talent and singular ambition who emerged from the backwoods of British Columbia to play in the NHL" (Doyle P7). Spencer began his National Hockey League (NHL) career with the Toronto Maple Leafs in the late 1960's. Nonetheless, a series of tragic events that occurred outside the rink during Spencer’s second NHL game would change his life and make headline news throughout Canada. On a Friday, Brian Spencer phoned his parents in British Columbia to let them know that he was to be interviewed between periods during the next evening’s *Hockey Night in Canada* broadcast. However, his father, Roy Spencer discovered on the evening of the scheduled broadcast that his local CBC affiliate in Prince George, British Columbia instead opted to carry another NHL hockey game rather than his son's Toronto Maple Leafs game. Outraged and armed with a gun, Roy Spencer drove to the Prince George CBC affiliate, held the station staff at gunpoint and attempted to force them to switch

their broadcast to the Maple Leafs game. Shortly thereafter, Roy Spencer was killed in a confrontation with RCMP officers outside the station (O'Malley A16).

Despite these disastrous events, Brian Spencer continued to play professional hockey--a sport where, as Greg Quill writes, "... he earned both adoration and scorn for his speed, quick temper, and roughness"(Quill C6). After playing professionally for a decade, Brian quit hockey in 1979 after being traded down to the minor leagues and moved to Florida. Unfortunately, as Quill notes, Brian "... was unable, even unwilling, to live less violently off the ice than he did in the rink". In 1987 Spencer was tried in Florida for the murder of a client of his girlfriend, Diane Delena--a call girl with whom he lived in a trailer (Quill C6). Ultimately acquitted of the first-degree murder charges, in yet another tragic turn of events in 1988, Brian Spencer was shot to death during a robbery in Riveria Beach Florida only months after his acquittal (Dacey S7).

The bizarre and troubled life of Brian Spencer would provide the foundation for one of Atom Egoyan's rare ventures into the world of made-for-television movies. By 1992-93, Atom Egoyan was firmly established as a critically acclaimed feature film director after completing successful films such as *The Adjuster*, *Speaking Parts*, *Next of Kin*, and *Family Viewing*.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Egoyan's former scriptwriting partner Paul Gross was also steadily gaining prominence as an actor in feature films and television productions.

Gross's initial script--adapted from Martin O'Malley's 1988 biography of Brian Spencer by the same name<sup>6</sup>--served as the lure for producer Alan Burke<sup>7</sup> to successfully entice Egoyan back to television. Egoyan's use of Gross's scripts on two separate occasions is in itself somewhat anomalous given Egoyan's penchant for writing his own scripts. In a 1993 interview with Christopher Harris, Egoyan commented that he was "deeply impressed by [Gross's] script,"



because it “had a strength of dialogue and sense of poetry that he couldn't have accomplished himself” (Harris C3; Houston D7; “Noises Off: Egoyan Throws His Hat Into the Rink” C3).

Despite Egoyan’s enthusiastic initial reception to Gross’s script, he did ultimately request revisions be made to it because, as Harris relates:

... the first draft--like the book--did not thoroughly address Roy Spencer's death as a defining element of Spencer's subsequent years. 'The one thing the first draft didn't have for me was an interesting structure. It started with his capture by the Florida police and was basically a courtroom drama. That aspect was relatively insignificant to me. I don't like courtroom dramas and I found it the basic fodder for a television movie' (Harris C3).

Gross and Egoyan worked together to reformulate the script.<sup>8</sup> Their final version, noted Harris, “does not follow the typical pattern of a Sunday night movie.” Meanwhile, Martin O’Malley characterized the movie as “wildly experimental,” adding, “is not surprising for Egoyan, but it is for sports movies” (O’Malley "Saturday Only" A16). Rather than abide to a “straightforward narrative structure” *Gross Misconduct* instead opted for a structure that “alternates between the lives of these two inwardly tormented men, the violent father and the violent son” (Harris C3). As Alice Sinclair relates, *Gross Misconduct* marked the first time in several years that a CBC production would “... take major risks with the forms of television or be self-reflexive of the medium itself” (Miller *Rewind and Search* 349).

In an interview with Christopher Harris, Egoyan discussed his rationale for using a nontraditional structure for the movie:

'When I watch something with a traditional structure, I can enjoy it,' he says. 'But when I work on something with a traditional structure--because of the amount of time I have to spend on it--I am terrified of getting bored. So I have to find some element of the structure which will possess alchemy whose final results I'm not sure of. That becomes exciting to me...and in its final form this script is really rare in that it is genuinely excited me. It was just so full of possibility' (qtd. in Harris C3).

*Gross Misconduct* was shot in the spring of 1992 on a budget estimated between \$2.2 and \$2.5 million dollars. Several locations were used for the filming including the Yukon (used to

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represent Fort St. James, British Columbia), Toronto (including scenes at Maple Leaf Gardens) and also southern Florida (Quill; "Noises Off: Egoyan Throws His Hat Into the Rink" C3).

Daniel Kash played the movie's lead role as Brian Spencer whose character was supported by a bevy of "... repressed Canadians ... libidinous Floridians" along with a prostitute girlfriend and a "coked-up real estate agent" (Lacey C3).

### **Major Themes of *In This Corner* & *Gross Misconduct*: Violence, Fear, Death, and Hockey**

***"To be a killer, sir, is a delicate balance between fear and anger. The type that lie down are all fear. Maniacs are all anger. Only boxers are killers. They're between fear and anger." -- Brian (one of Terry's boxing associates), *In This Corner*.***

***"I envy you, Terry. You can see your enemy. He stands in front of you. He has a face." -- Ryan Shaw (IRA terrorist), *In This Corner*.***

***"I never have been much of a casual person. I'm a hockey player. Almost genetically violent, playing a violent sport, sitting on a powder keg all the time. When I hate, I hate. When I love, I love. That's what life's all about on the ice." -- Brian Spencer, *Gross Misconduct*.***

*In This Corner* and *Gross Misconduct* tackled a myriad of issues—violence, fear, death, the near deification of hockey, the mediated television experience and more. In some instances both productions shared similar themes such as violence, fear, and death. In other instances, themes were distinctive to a particular production (e.g., the deification of hockey). Moreover, *Gross Misconduct* tended to use a combination of unconventional story devices whereas *In This Corner* relied more heavily upon traditional storytelling conventions albeit with unique twists to them.

Violence and its myriad ramifications served as a common central theme for both *In This Corner* and *Gross Misconduct*. Regarding the violence depicted in *In This Corner*, Doreen Martens commented, "much of the story's [*In This Corner*'s] power lies in the fact that there is no incomprehensible motivation here behind acts of violence, just calculating intelligence" (Martens 26). Martens further noted, "As the product of many generations of hatred and

violence, Ryan's (the IRA terrorist) attitudes and actions seem—in context—perfectly logical, though horrifying." "*In This Corner* turns out to be the very antithesis of the *Rocky* story," writes Doreen Martens, "...an intelligent little piece that shows us how violence may be not merely the act of a madman, but the inevitable result when anger in pursuit of very human ideals defeats both faith and reason and ends in an appalling indifference toward humanity" (Martens 26).

Atom Egoyan devoted an equal or even greater amount of attention to violence in *Gross Misconduct* than in the earlier work. As Victoria Dwyer wrote, the "... movie makes it clear that beating up other players was a higher priority than scoring goals. The producers have punctuated the dramatic sequences with documentary footage of frenzied crowds lustily cheering the athlete's violent outbursts" (Dwyer 50). [Writer Paul] Gross argued that the violence in Brian "... Spencer's professional life moulded the hockey star's personality--and left him with a hot-tempered, visceral approach to life off the rink. 'When he left hockey, Spinner was baffled that something that was celebrated on the ice could only spell trouble in the outside world,' said Gross. 'It was that confusion that I wanted to get across.' (Dwyer 50).

Beyond the inclusion of numerous scenes depicting Brian Spencer's violent temper both inside and outside the rink, violence in the guise of police brutality is also depicted in *Gross Misconduct*. For example, while Brian Spencer sits inside a car in a Florida parking lot, he and the audience are given a clear view of a policeman repeatedly hitting an already subdued suspect with his nightstick.<sup>9</sup>

Fear and death are also themes shared by *In This Corner* and *Gross Misconduct*. The act of killing and its psychological impact upon the killer are addressed in *In This Corner*. Terry Dunne, the Canadian-Irish boxer 'touched death'--as the IRA's Ryan Shaw referred to killing during conversations with him--by accidentally killing an opponent during a match. Conversely,

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Ryan's killing of others through terrorist bombings and other related activities was impersonal and remote. Unlike Terry, Ryan was not obliged to stare into the eyes of his dying victim(s). Moreover, while Terry still saw "... his profession (i.e., boxing) as marking a point of delicate balance in the world of violence, between anger and violence" (Martens 26), Ryan lacked a similar balance as a terrorist.

Unlike violence, fear, and death, the theme of hockey would be the purview of *Gross Misconduct*. In reference to the movie's treatment of hockey Bill Anderson noted, *Gross Misconduct* "...is bound up in the hockey mythology of Canada--the vision of escaping a small northern town, making it on to *Hockey Night in Canada*, waving to the crowd as the first star of the game and sipping champagne from the Stanley Cup" (Anderson D9). Clearly, hockey as a mediated experience was an aspect of Egoyan's life as well as he explains:

The fact is that our experience of hockey is for the most part a mediated experience. Spencer is almost addicted to *Hockey Night in Canada*, where *Hockey Night in Canada* is his only entree into a world outside of his small town. That fixation was certainly part of my upbringing. That game, that program was more than just the recorded document of a hockey game. Just the effect of that song, that opening refrain has on all our psyches: it has meaning other than this is *Hockey Night in Canada* (qtd. in O'Malley A16).

In a similar article related to the topic, Egoyan added, "I wanted to make viewers aware that they are engaged in the very medium that somehow set in motion the whole story they are watching" (Dwyer 50).

According to producer Alan Burke, "... Egoyan saw more than just the story.... 'Atom's interested in another level. He's interested in the way imagery is made and created on television, the fact that *Hockey Night in Canada* is broadcast every Sunday night to a large audience, that all Roy's dreams and Spinner's ambitions came from that screen ... And the cause of Roy's death was the lack of those images'" (Burke qtd. in Atherton H1).

### **Specific Devices Used to Frame the Stories**

As noted earlier, *Gross Misconduct* employs a number of nontraditional devices to convey Brian Spencer's story to the viewing audience. These devices include flashbacks and flashforwards, the use of a young boy in a Maple Leafs uniform who "... speaks for Spencer by way of narration," interweaving of archival and dramatized footage of Brian Spencer playing hockey, and the use of arch title cards (Dacey S7).

#### *Flashbacks/Flashforwards & "The Young Brian"*

Although *Gross Misconduct* begins with the birth of Brian Spencer, it quickly branches into two main storylines with Brian's life serving as the central storyline while a second one "... recreates Roy Spencer's last day" (Anderson D9). The dual storyline is complemented by a third unique component—"the supernatural spirit of Brian Spencer, in the form of a schoolboy hockey player" (Anderson D9). The young incarnation of Brian, as John Doyle describes, "appears at intervals to reflect on his dad, hockey, women, and money. This is the driven boy in all professional athletes and a commentary on the irony of treating grown men who play games for a living as superheroes and role models." As Anderson points out, the young Brian's "... soliloquies about the web of emotions that could see a father and son both killed, in a sense, out of too much love for hockey." Used in combination, these elements gradually build "... a parallel between the last night of Roy Spencer's life with his son's damned existence," adds Doyle.

#### *Interweaving of Archival and Created TV Images*

Another unique device used in *Gross Misconduct* involves the blending of archival and created television. Egoyan, keenly aware of the production team's inability to "recreate Spencer's game as it was in the 1970's" (Quill C6) yet still needed to recreate some type of "... realistic looking hockey scenes from Spencer's NHL career" (Harris C3). In order to achieve the desired

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result, Egoyan intercut specific (Spencer) plays and fights from old black-and-white CBC *Hockey Night in Canada* kinescopes with “elaborately choreographed on-ice sequences” with Daniel Kash (Spencer) and other actors (Quill C6; Harris C3). According to Egoyan, “the resulting mix of what is clearly archival material with what is clearly dramatized, is a conscious attempt to remind viewers that they are watching television, not Spencer's actual life in video replay. I wanted to make it clear that this was a construct...We're reminding viewers that this is a reconstruction of a life. And we're making them aware that they are witnessing something which by nature is completely subjective” (Harris C3).

#### *Spencer's Life: A Deck of Title Cards*

Egoyan also used yet another device--arch title cards--as a way to emphasize the enormous impact Roy Spencer's death had upon Brian's life. The title cards, with sentences chronicling Roy Spencer's activities prior to his death appear on the screen for several seconds at a time throughout the movie.<sup>10</sup> “On the day Roy Spencer was shot dead he did his chores early,” “The day Roy Spencer was shot dead he installed a new television antenna,” “The day Roy Spencer was shot dead he walked through virgin snow,” are just a few examples of the sentences that appeared on the cards. “What I wanted to get across,' said Egoyan, 'was a father's mania when he realizes he cannot share in this golden evening he has worked all his life to build” (Dwyer 50).

#### **Critical & Audience Responses to *In This Corner* and *Gross Misconduct***

Relatively little critical response to *In This Corner* appeared in the Canadian press. However, this was certainly not the case with *Gross Misconduct* since a relatively large amount of column space was devoted to widely divergent critical reviews of the movie in newspapers throughout Canada and even in the United States.

Martin O'Malley described *Gross Misconduct* as "wildly experimental which," he added, "is not surprising for Egoyan, but it is for sports movies." Both O'Malley and Liam Lacey felt *Gross Misconduct* echoed Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* although Lacey noted there were relatively few other films that it could be compared to:

...as an examination of the life of a contemporary gladiator, the film has few parallels. Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull*, which explored the brutal spiritual battles of the boxer Jake La Motta, comes to mind, but Egoyan's concerns are more coolly clinical: *Gross Misconduct* is an autopsy report on the myth of professional hockey as Canada's version of Hollywood, a place where a marginal youth could become rich, esteemed and endlessly on display. Brian Spencer's too-short life illustrates the imprint of that myth on the wounded consciousness of one man" (Lacey C3).

On a related point, Mike Beamish of the *Vancouver Sun* commented:

For the most part, sports movies tend to be either boring, silly, naïve, far from reality of any combination of the above. Typical of what Hollywood puts out these days. On Sunday night, however, along came *Gross Misconduct*, a CBC made-for-TV movie that is neither absurdly funny like *Slap Shot* nor insufferably cute like the *Mighty Ducks*. In fact, *Gross Misconduct*, .... Is probably the most grimmest, rawest, most depressing hockey movie I've ever seen" (Beamish D7).

In a glowingly positive review, John Doyle wrote, "*Gross Misconduct* is a triumph of tragic realism. Intuitively and correctly Egoyan presents Spencer as the Great Canadian Tragic Hero--a likable, doomed real life hockey player on the skids" (Doyle P7). Liam Lacey cautioned, however, that "*Gross Misconduct* was liable for criticism for aggrandizing an also-ran player, ... or for concentrating on his cruder side" (Lacey C3). Although these and similar comments were made by various critics, overall, criticism tended to be based largely upon the critics reception to one or more of the devices used to tell the story.

The use of the young incarnation of Brian Spencer as a narrator, however, proved one of the most controversial devices of the movie from the critics' standpoint. For example, Alan Pergament of the *Buffalo News* lamented that, for him, the young Brian Spencer was "The most annoying aspect of the film.... It is supposed to be artistic, but it comes off as contrived and

stupid.” Echoing Pergament's views, Paul Delean noted, "And what exactly is the point of having 10-year-old Shaun Ashmore (as young Brian) spout profundities throughout the movie?" (Delean F4).

Egoyan's use of archival kinescope footage, on the other hand, received largely favorable reviews from critics as evidenced by Paul Delean's comments:

The wisest move of all was inclusion of the archival footage showing the real Spencer in action at Maple Leaf Gardens, scoring his first goal, being interviewed by Hockey Night in Canada's Ward Cornell. Those clips convey better than anything Spencer's determination, exuberance and ferocity, as well as his appealing shyness, simplicity and insecurity. In this case, truth beats fiction hands down" (Delean F4).

As a whole, *The Buffalo News'* Alan Pergament regarded *Gross Misconduct* as “a major disappointment,” and subsequently gave it a mere “2 stars out of 5”. Citing what he considered an excessive amount of screen time on Roy Spencer, Pergament argued, “The film 'hits' viewers over the head with the idea that Brian Spencer's violent death was inevitable because of his genes. It also spends far to little time explaining the supposed 'gentle' side of "Spinner" Spencer....The film doesn't even seem to get Spencer's relationship with his father completely right. Friends of Spencer noted he never got over his dad's death, because he loved his father and he had helped him succeed. Other than Brian's brief eulogy at his father's funeral, you don't get a sense of that love" Pergament also expressed his displeasure over the scant attention *Gross Misconduct* paid to Spencer's years with the Buffalo Sabres. Pergament wrote, "This film will be especially disappointing to anyone expecting it to focus on Spencer's years with the Sabres (1974 to 1977), which are dismissed in about two minutes” (Pergament B11).

Other critics, such as the *Montreal Gazette's* Paul Delean singled out Gross's script as a source of criticism: "Hard as it might seem to screw up a story this good," writes Delean, "the *Gross Misconduct* team comes awfully close. Writer Paul Gross is the worst offender, having



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characters deliver with a straight face such heavy-handed gems as 'I'm a hockey player, almost genetically violent' and 'control your fear, learn to use it, it'll become your best friend'" (Delean F4). Of course, Delean later would also set his sights upon Egoyan as well, noting, "The disjointed, eerie and over-stylized presentation opted for by highly-touted director Atom Egoyan ... also is more annoying than effective" (Delean F4).

"With *Gross Misconduct: The Life of Brian 'Spinner' Spencer* ....., director Atom Egoyan ... takes TV biography in a new direction. Some viewers may long for a compass," cautioned the *Financial Post's* Marc Dacey prior to the movie's CBC debut (Dacey S7). In a similar vein, after attending a screening of the movie, Martin O'Malley observed, "I suspect it will flummox *Hockey Night in Canada* fans as much as it will flummox the cin(e)astes who adore Atom Egoyan. (O'Malley "Saturday Only" A16). Undoubtedly, many viewers of *Gross Misconduct* agreed with Canuck broadcaster Garry Monahan's straightforward assessment of the film, namely that it was "... a little hard to follow" (Beamish D7).

When asked to comment about his expectations of *Gross Misconduct's* audience, Egoyan stated:

You have the advantage of starting with a popular figure, so I think a lot of people will tune in. I hope people are able to approach it the way they would a theatrical feature, and wait and see what the total experience of the film is. But television viewers are perhaps more fickle,' he says. 'My attitude has always been that you have the highest expectations of the viewer. You can't just assume people have the attention span of gnats (qtd. in Harris C3).

Referring to the portrayal of Brian Spencer in *Gross Misconduct*, Egoyan commented "I didn't want to betray Brian with stylistic tricks. The challenge was to represent him as he was. In TV, certain ground rules have to be observed; it's a medium that's rooted in formula. But then, most feature films are, too." Beyond *Gross Misconduct's* use of various unconventional story devices, the movie also gained a modicum of added publicity thanks to a sexually explicit scene

featured in the movie prompting viewer complaints to CBC affiliates throughout Canada (especially in Alberta).<sup>11</sup>

*Gross Misconduct* reportedly attracted 1.2 millions viewers during its initial CBC broadcast on Sunday February 28, 1993. However, this number was regarded as “disappointing” for a Sunday night CBC movie. After the movie aired, Liam Lacey suggested that although “...the complex movie was not an easy sell” the CBC’s promotion of the movie may have contributed to its lackluster audience numbers. “One can't help but wonder if the unfortunate promotional ads which featured actor Daniel Kash sporting badly dyed orange ringlets, like Little Orphan Annie, wasn't more a turn-off than a help, pondered Lacey” (Lacey “Scanners” C6).

### **Discussion**

“Our writers, producers, and executives have always been more comfortable than the Americans with ambiguity in characterization, literate dialogue, sometimes open endings and often complex subtext,” argues Canadian drama scholar Mary Jane Miller (qtd. in McQueen 3). Both *In This Corner* and *Gross Misconduct* embody these distinctive traits of Canadian drama. Egoyan and Gross avoid bright line demarcations between good and evil, right and wrong and make no attempt to tie up all of the plot's loose ends in a tidy package by the end of the broadcast. Instead, they force viewers to draw their own conclusions about oftentimes complex and passion-filled issues addressed in the stories. *In This Corner* and *Gross Misconduct* represent the antithesis to mindless entertainment. Instead, they offer abundant “food for thought.”

*In this Corner* was inspired by world events (i.e., the question surrounding freedom of Northern Ireland from British rule and the actions of the Irish Republican Army to counter this situation) whereas *Gross Misconduct* depicted an individual hockey player. Although both programs featured sports —boxing and hockey respectively—neither of them could be

characterized nor arguably discussed for merely their “sports” content. Instead, in each instance sports played a secondary role to fear, violence, and death—aspects of humanity that makes us uncomfortable and uneasy yet comprise an integral part of our everyday realities. Devoid of Disneyesque happy endings, the characters portrayed in *Gross Misconduct* and *In This Corner* were destined not to live “happily ever after”.

Although some years have passed since the production of *In This Corner* and *Gross Misconduct*, both productions retain their power and potency even for present day audiences. Given the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and its aftermath, audiences arguably may relate even more strongly to *In This Corner* than audiences did when the program originally aired in 1986. *In This Corner* dared to question core long-standing assumptions about terrorists and terrorism—an endeavor that could be deemed heretical by some segments of society today although it is a question that begs attention. Likewise, the topics addressed in *Gross Misconduct*--the deification of sports and athletes, the role of television in our daily lives remain relevant as well. While Egoyan entertained audiences with *In This Corner* and *Gross Misconduct*, he simultaneously compelled them to reflect upon larger societal questions and upon their own values and viewpoints.

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Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Although filmed in 1985, the CBC did not broadcast *In This Corner* until February 2, 1986. *Gross Misconduct*, on the other hand, was filmed in 1992 and broadcast in 1993. The production dates are used throughout the essay.

<sup>2</sup>*For the Record* was a successor to *Performance*, the CBC's weekly arts and entertainment program.

<sup>3</sup>During the period 1987-1988, Egoyan also directed episodes of the television series *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>: The Series*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *The New Twilight Zone* as well as *Looking for Nothing*.

<sup>4</sup>Although probably best known for his portrayal of RCMP officer Benton Fraser in the television series *Due South*, Paul Gross has also worked as a director, producer, playwright, singer/songwriter, and screenwriter. In addition to *Thunder*, *Perfect Mind*, a science fiction musical performed at Toronto's McLaughlin Planetarium, Paul Gross also wrote the following plays between 1981 and 1986: *The Deer and the Antelope Play* (1981), *Ashes to Ashes*, *Dust to Damascus* (1982), *The Dead of Winter* (1982), *Buchanan* (also performed under the titles *Sprung Rhythm*) (1984) and *Tension Zero* (1986). Most, if not all, of Gross's plays could be arguably considered unconventional to varying degrees.

<sup>5</sup>The following article excerpt helps to illustrate Egoyan's international notoriety at this particular point in time: "Toronto filmmaker Atom Egoyan is off to Greece this week for a retrospective of his work at the Thessalonika Film Festival. A European retrospective? For a Canadian writer-director barely in his 30s? Well, yes, and it turns out it's by no means the first. At this time last year, there was a traveling exhibition of Egoyan's four features (*Next of Kin*, *Family Viewing*, *Speaking Parts* and *The Adjuster*) plus all his short films (beginning with the



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fine but seldom-seen *Howard in Particular*, from 1979) in the Italian cities of Bologna, Turin and Venice" ("Noises off: No Side-Splitting Gags Please").

<sup>6</sup>Martin O'Malley's book provides a detailed account of Brian Spencer's life, loves, and legal entanglements along with the circumstances surrounding his death. O'Malley, a former Toronto *Globe and Mail* writer, served as a consultant on the film (Houston D7).

<sup>7</sup>According to a 1992 article by Tony Atherton, "As early as 1985, as producer for the *5th Estate*, Burke had seen the spark of a movie in Spencer's career. When *Globe & Mail* writer Martin O'Malley published Spencer's gripping biography, *Gross Misconduct*, in 1988, Burke snapped up the rights" (Atherton H1). Also, according to O'Malley's book, a Los Angeles-based producer initially began a movie based upon Spencer's life with the project involving Richard Dean Anderson and others. However, it later became the CBC-financed project.

<sup>8</sup>A comparison of four different draft versions of the *Gross Misconduct* script reveals that substantial revisions were made to the script over time. Revisions included the rearrangement of scenes, changes in tone and dialogue (e.g., earlier versions of the script featured the characters using "eh" and other Canadianisms while the dialogue was largely absent from later versions), additions/changes to the various story devices, and more. Indeed, given the extent of the revisions, the final version of the script bears relatively resemblance to the initial draft.

<sup>9</sup>While Martin O'Malley discusses the need for a high-profile white murderer to be executed (Brian Spencer was considered an ideal candidate) in his book, the police brutality scene is absent from the work.

<sup>10</sup>Martin O'Malley's book uses the days of the week as chapter headings accompanied by subheadings that relate to events in Brian Spencer's life. For example, "Chapter One Monday: Florida versus Brian Spencer;" Chapter Two Tuesday: The Letter from the Gardens" and so forth. *The Globe and Mail's* Liam Lacey observed, "as a title and motif [the title cards as used in *Gross Misconduct* are] ... irksomely similar to a current Pepsi commercial based on a Van Halen song, which feature the title 'Right now ...'" (Lacey C3).

<sup>11</sup>"Practically every day, people call the CBC to complain about something, and this week's winning topic for viewer outrage was a glimpse of frontal (female) nudity during the TV movie *Gross Misconduct*. The fact-based film ... aired at 8 p.m. Sunday. At around 9:20 p.m., actor Daniel Kash ... was engaged in the throes of passion in a trailer with an actress playing one of the many women in his life. Unless I missed some other earlier debut, *Gross Misconduct* marked the first time frontal nudity has aired on English-language CBC Television in prime time. Kash was wearing bikini-style underwear. The scene prompted 63 calls to the CBC Calgary's answering machine, and about the same number in Edmonton. CBC Toronto got half as many calls as Calgary, possibly because cable subscribers in that city have been used to a soft-porn station for years. How significant is a total of 63 calls? Well, if *Coronation Street* is pre-empted, about 300 angry messages pile up. But even so, 63 equates to 'a fairly strong protest,' says publicist Jane Chamberlin. In my view, the scene was fine. It helped to depict Spencer's attitude (the woman was a friend's girlfriend) and general loss of control, as did a violent scene in which he beats up another driver during an argument. Apparently there were no complaints about the violence, just the sex" (Blakey, March 5, 1993, p. C12). In a March 5, 1993 *Calgary Herald* article, Bob Blakey argued that the "explicit sexual scene" featuring brief female frontal nudity "was not out of place." William Monaghan, a Calgary, AB viewer responded to Blakey's

contention, writing:

... the 'nude scene' in the TV production *Gross Misconduct* must have steamed up Bob Blakey's glasses if all he saw was a bit of frontal nudity. I saw some fairly explicit sexual action and heard dialogue to match. I saw sexual action on the CBC during prime time when children are still likely to be watching. I saw a poor production portraying the life of a sad individual whose life came to a tragic end. I saw taxpayers money being spent on excess violence and sex at a time when there is a move to eliminate this kind of garbage from TV and videos.

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