L\looking at alienated people on a film screen can be like staring at a blob of grey — bleak, blank, blah. Atom Egoyan’s Family Viewing is just the opposite. In his second feature, Egoyan shows us that grey can be made up of different shades, textures and even bursts of colour — that it can have depth.

In Next of Kin, Egoyan’s first feature, he dealt with ethnicity, the family and people’s inability to communicate. In Family Viewing, he develops those themes and also explores the idea of memory and the way technology affects it. Alienation is but one of the themes.

Egoyan’s characters are trying to escape alienation, trying desperately to communicate, and by doing so, to tie into something that will make them feel good. The struggle for human contact fought against a backdrop of the technology and isolation characteristic of modern life, is impeded by both family and the frailties of memory.

Family Viewing begins with a shot of a TV screen through a pile of frames. It then cuts to a young man peering across the screen at the audience (he’s actually looking at a monitor). He switches channels (as if turning the audience off) and the credits appear between channel changes. At the end of the sequence, there is a freeze-frame and then the action is reversed. The scene is cheeky and playful. It’s also a bit show-offy, it’s just enough to make you hope the rest of the movie will live up to the exhibition.

The young man is Van (Aidan Tierney). He lives with Stan, his WASP father (David Hemblen) and Sondra, Stan’s girlfriend (Gabrielle Rose) in a co-op that has the kind of chrome and leather utilitarian look which sometimes passes for elegant. Van’s mother left him and his father, but he still goes to see his Arme-