Atom Egoyan's Speaking Parts

With his third film, Speaking Parts, Atom Egoyan continues his exploration of memory, family, and technology. The landscape is becoming familiar: the video images, the alienated hero, the dominating patriarch, the bewildered femine, the highly stylized performances. This time, however, technique is more assured; the vision denser, bleaker, and at times funnier.

Clara (Gabrielle Rose), university professor and writer, sits in a trance in front of a monitor in a video mausoleum gazing at images of her dead brother. Lance (Michael McGinnis) moves in a semi-catatonic state from room to room in a luxurious hotel changing sheets. Lisa (Annemarie Kaniian), sorts laundry in the hotel basement; she is abstracted, dissociated from her tasks and environment. The dance begins as austere as an intricate Noh drama, in which gestures and silence delineate the boundaries of human communication. Here, however, video cuts a technological swaths across the human, exposing, like an unhealed sore, memory and truth. When the body is stripped of skin, we find, not flesh or blood, but video images.

Lance waits for his chance at a speaking part, and until that chance comes, he is, for the most part, silent. Lisa waits for Lance to return her unrequited love and until then watches videos of B-movies in which Lance appears as an extra. Clara checks into the hotel where Lance and Lisa work, local production headquarters for the film. She has written about her brother's sacrifice (he died giving her a lung). In a hotel meeting room, she confronts with the distant Producer (Dayl Hembly) through a video link. Lance leaves his picture and resums Clara's room and carries on with his job, which includes sexual services for lonely female guests, arranged by the hotel housekeeper. Despite her sex, the housekeeper plays the role of local patriarch, while the Producer, a grizzled Big Brother, murmurs reassuring words and commands from the giant monitor.

At the video shop, Eddie (Tony Nardi) tells Lisa that his work includes recording events like orgies and weddings. Lance provides yeoman's service to the hotel guest in room 106, and repeatedly for Clara after he auditions him. Lance gets the part, his first speaking part, while Clara is being roused out of the picture, erased and multilated by the Producer, who revises history by changing the script. In an effort to save her story, Clara goes on location and waits, like Kafka's K, to meet with the Producer who is never accessible. The video link that served the purposes of patriarchal control becomes the instrument of Clara's and Lance's illicit sexual liaison. Illit because of the electronic media's usurpation of the sexual, and illit because of the essentially incestuous nature of Clara's relationship to Lance, who has become her brother's surrogate.

The film is particularly successful in maintaining the balance between the Lance-Clara story and the Lisa-Eddy one; moving effortlessly from one to the other, making each the converse of the other.

In one of the funniest scenes in the film, Lisa operates Eddy's second camera at a wedding, driving the Barbie bride to tears and the Ken brother's surrogate. Lisa dominates her loveless room with another Lance video, while Lance retreats to the video mausoleum; Lisa to her room with another Lance video, while Lance realizes he has to find his first speaking part: a talk show whose host is played by the Producer, and whose topic is organ transplant. In a crescendo of rising tension, the film cuts from Lance to Clara to Lisa who, under the pressure of unresolved emotions, begins to video-hallucinate. The crescendo ends in the final explosive moment when Lance shouts at her for speaking part and the patriarchal lie.

In Speaking Parts, Egoyan has married a concern with the weight of the image to the force of the word. Speech is fragmented and rudimentary, the characters speak in parts, compared to the sophistication of the video imagery. Speech, which holds out the promise of communication, is the medium of deceit; whereas video is often the channel of truth. The Producer tells Clara he respects her, that the story is special. But his video face immediately tells us a different story.

It is through their video hallucinations that the actors rarely strike a false note. Arsinée Khanjian brings to the screen a sweet innocence, which is particularly effective in her bewildered search for love; while David Hemblen is superb as the monstrous patriarch whose images dominate the given universe.

Tom Pelmutter