

Trespassed territory

Atom Egoyan and the making of images

BY TOM PERLMUTTER

There is a moment of truth for film students when they are confronted by reality. For second-year Ryerson students, it hit when Janine Marchessault brought in former Department of Communications bureaucrat Patricia Finley to talk about film distribution in Canada. With one simple phrase – “there is no film industry in Canada” – she shattered hopes, aspirations, dreams. A heavy pall of gloom settled on the student body. In two short hours they had learned that truth does not set free, it debilitates. Marchessault, desperate to counter the growing rumours that Sartre had it wrong – hell is not other people, it’s making films in Canada – turned to the great independent hope, Atom Egoyan.

He was told to “pump them up”. His credentials: he had somehow managed to steer through the mischarted waters of Canadian film and emerge intact. For the time being at least. However, even as he disseminated hope and solace, Atom still managed to let slip that “if you catch me on a bad day I’d bring a noose with me into class.” Never mind. As Dr. Johnson once noted, the prospect of hanging concentrates the

mind wonderfully. And for the students his presence was hope enough, radiating as it did the charisma of achievement.

COLUMBO'S PROGRESS

Atom arrived a kind of Detective Columbo of the independent scene: a little late, a little flustered, with an air of bewilderment as if he’d stumbled into the wrong place, the wrong time, the wrong life. As 21 heads (4 women, 2 non-whites, 3 with beards, 1 redhead and 1 with a baseball cap) craned concertedly towards him, Atom launched into an independent’s inspirational sermon.

With all the hesitations appropriate to his persona, Atom regaled the class with the legend of the making of film: how he had heard a voice, how the voice was transubstantiated into script, how script in hand the filmmaker undertook a journey during which he resisted enticing temptations to concretize the script (“it is ephemeral, it can only exist as film”), how he eventually found allies in the Arts Councils and fought mighty battles with the Film Bureaucrats until, at last, the film reached Cineplex sanctuary. Two things became clear in his recital of his pilgrim’s progress: the necessity for

constancy of purpose and the fact that there is no sanctuary.

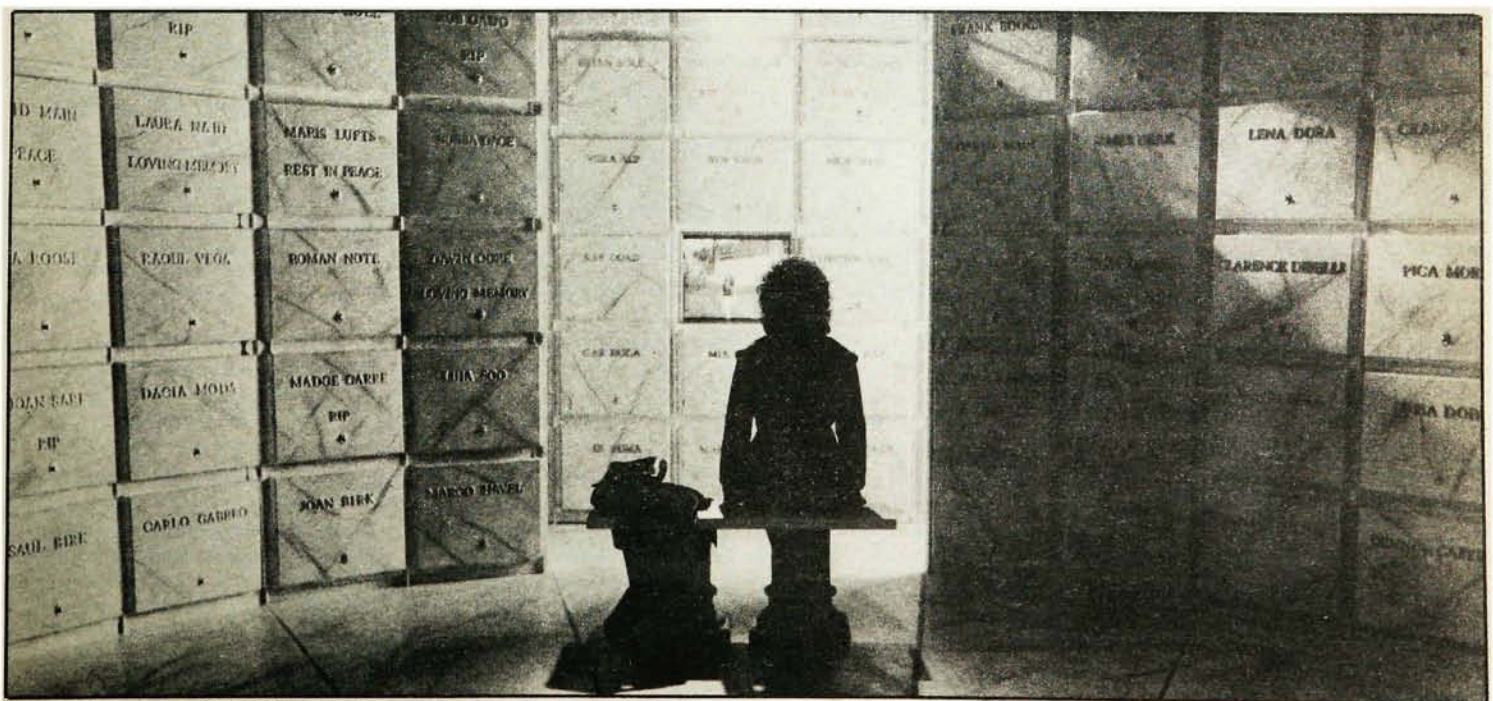
Beneath the veneer of the serious-minded young filmmaker fumbling for the truth is a serious-minded young filmmaker adorned with an almost ruthless singlemindedness. Egoyan told his audience “the beauty of independent film is that it can pursue its vision in a singular way without wavering.” When the film bureaucrats wanted him to cover himself by shooting the video portions of *Family Viewing* in film and video, Atom resisted. “It would have sent a confused signal to actors and crew – that I didn’t know what I was doing. It would have been a massive compromise which would have affected the integrity of the film.” For Atom the “thread by which the films work is so thinny alteration would be disastrous.”

WHAT'S TRULY COMMERCIAL

Honesty and integrity are iconic words for the independent: their pole star, the only light by which they may guide themselves. Atom told his audience, “I have to make sure what I’m saying is honest.”

He is particularly apoplectic about the notion of a commercial film. “It’s a fallacy,” he said. “What they mean is a mainstream film.”

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Is death just a rerun? Gabrielle Rose in *Speaking Parts*.

Americans make it because they see the world that way. But we don't see the world that way. We're certainly able to create the glossiness, the slickness; unable to make it believable unless you really believe it."

He added, irony of ironies, that it's films like his that are in the end truly commercial. With their small budgets they're able to recoup their costs, sometimes even within the home market, and enter into profit relatively quickly.

Honesty is a voice of one's own. Honesty is also a morality expressed in a consciousness of images and image-making. "You have to be very careful of the images you absorb and the images you create." Atom is "very self-conscious of the process of filming other people. I can't do it without knowing the weight of what I'm doing."

This is the point where he differentiates film from television. For Egoyan, television is about glib, seductive images; film is about images that the viewer must work his or her way through. As for working in television, which he does to pay the bills, he confesses sheepishly that "it's obviously a hypocritical thing to be doing... if I were a purist I wouldn't be doing it."

Perhaps because he does television, Atom throws himself all the more into its opposite. "My tendency," he said, "is to become more and more hermetic to comment on the dangers of that kind of image-making." But more likely it's a road he would have travelled in any case from, what he considers, "a painfully direct *Next of Kin*" to the more camouflaged constructs of his latest venture, *Speaking Parts*.

AUDIENCES ARE NOT INSECTS

Honesty may be its own reward; an even better reward is audience. On the one hand Atom told the class that there is an audience. "No matter how uneducated your audience, they will know when they're being condescended to.

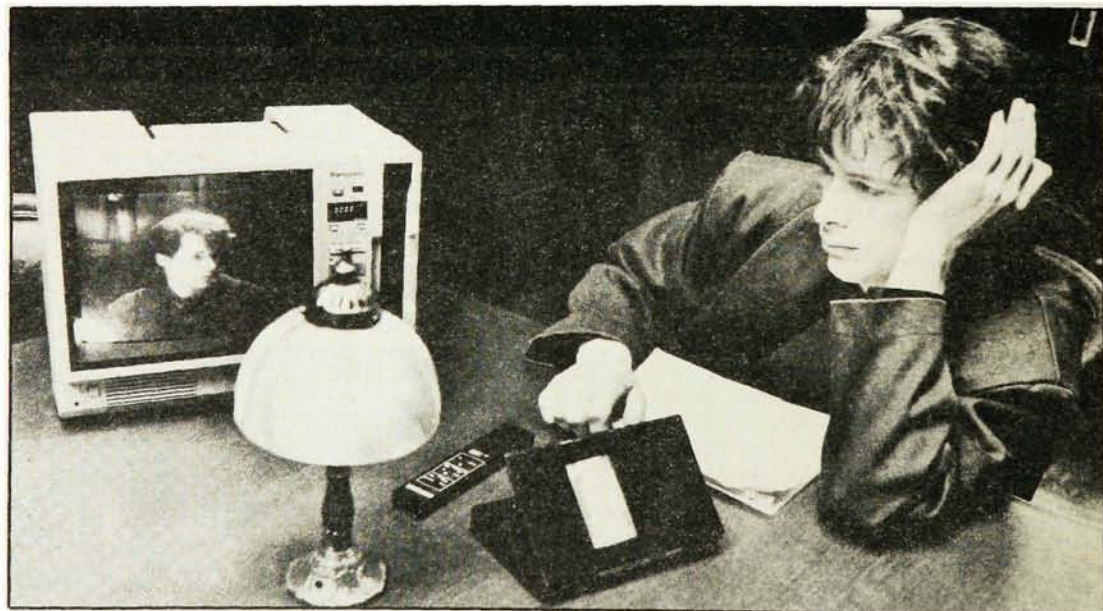
Audiences do not have the attention span of a gnat." On the other hand, that audience is not at your neighbourhood Cineplex.

For Atom the consolation is that "film travels. It doesn't have to find a market in its home city. And it can last. It may not be seen this year or next. If you tell a story with all honesty, it will find a time and a place." The subtext reads, probably not in Canada. Perhaps the rumours about hell and filmmaking and Canada were right. Atom Hopegiver feeds their worst fears. "I don't make films for North American audiences."

The problem is a failure of nerve. On the part of distributors. "Even the most visionary distributors lack conviction." (Shades of Yeats: "The best lack conviction; the worst are full of passionate intensity.") On the part of audiences. "An entire generation of filmgoers are not accustomed to seeing themselves on the screen.... The reason we cannot sit back and absorb the image is that we're worried about production values."



Michael McManus and Arsinée Khanjian.



Michael McManus in Atom Egoyan's new film, *Speaking Parts*, selected for the Quinzaine des réalisateurs at the Cannes Film Festival

THE TERRITORY OF ILLUSION

Atom didn't speak much about *Speaking Parts*. When filming he resisted the intrusive nosing of reporters, to conserve the emotional energy of the project. Even as he prepared it for its Cannes premiere, his comments on it were brief and elliptical. He told the students that "film is ultimately a territorial venture; the territory is that screen." And *Speaking Parts* is about "the territory of image and the exploration of that territory." He said that, in that sense, it's a very Canadian film. Its region is not a distinct geographical entity but a psychic one bounded by claustrophobia and insularity. If America is defined in some sense by the notion of frontier,

then Canada is bounded by the idea of territory. For us there are no frontiers to cross, only territories to traverse. But perhaps, in the end, it's in making his films for elsewhere that Atom is most Canadian.

Over lunch, fast-food Chinese take-away in a nearby mall, the director hunched over a 10-line description of his film which he must send to the Quinzaine in Cannes. What he's got so far is:

I have worked in a hotel for five years; I have worked in film for 10. Both of these professions involve the creation of illusion. [Think of Orwell's description of the grand hotel in Down and Out in Paris and London—the discrepancy between the upstairs of luxury, the downstairs of squalor.] In one, the

territory of illusion is a room. In the other, it is a screen. People move in and out of rooms. Actors move in and out of screens.

So far, so good. But where to next? Atom tried out different statements.

Speaking Parts explores an emotional terrain which moves freely between room and screen. It is a terrain of desire, deception and need.

Not quite right, and it was time to go. Atom Egoyan, the great independent hope. A product of a marginalized and traumatized ethnic community, living films in a video age, he projects his alienation onto the big screen where it becomes the territory we trespass: that desert journey to scourge and purify our video flesh. ●



International Experimental Film Congress
May 28-June 4, 1989
Toronto, Canada

The International Experimental Film Congress is a week-long celebration of cinema's avant-garde. The Congress will feature film screening, workshops, and lectures devoted to avant-garde film. Organized with the assistance of the Art Gallery of Ontario, The Goethe Institute Toronto, York University, The University of Toronto, and the Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre, the Congress promises to be an excellent opportunity for screening and discussing new work, as well as reassessing older work. The Congress will feature:

OPENING EVENING: A TRIBUTE TO JACK CHAMBERS: Organized by Tom Graff, this special event will feature screenings of three rarely-seen Chambers' films, *Mosaic*, *R34* and *Hybrid*, as well as the classics, *Circle* and *Hart of London*.

NATIONAL SCREENINGS: curated by Mario Falsetto (Canada), Karola Gramann (Eastern Europe), Alf Bold (West Germany), Joao Luiz Vieira (Latin America), Deke Dusinger (Britain and the Continent), Nick Deocampo (The Philippines).

THEMATIC SCREENINGS: curated by Bruce Elder, Rose Lowder, Steve Anker, and Simon Field.

NEW HORIZONS: work of the Emerging Generation, curated by Wilhelm and Birgit Hein (Britain and the Continent), Howard Guttenplan (United States), and Janine Marchessault (Canada).

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PRACTICUM SESSIONS: Stan Brakhage, Robert Breer, David Rimmer, Pat O'Neill, and Joyce Wieland.

PANEL DISCUSSIONS: *Cinema's Phoenix: Deaths and Resurrections of the Avant-Garde* (Annette Michelson—moderator, Fred Camper, Deke Dusinger, Birgit Hein, and Michael Dorland); *The Interface Between the New Technology and Avant-Garde Film* (Christoph Janetzko—moderator, Paul Hoffert, Grahame Weinbren, Carolee Schneemann); *Cinema's Pure Material as Libidinal Liberation: Issues of Sexuality in Contemporary Experimental Film* (Leila Sujir—moderator, Carolee Schneemann, Noll Brinckmann, Bruce Elder, Wilhelm Hein); *Vision and Language: Experimental and Textual Strategies in Avant-Garde Film* (Paul Arthur—moderator, Marjorie Keller, Maureen Turim—Abigail Child's *Mayhem* to be screened and discussed); *Film as Film: Critical Language and False Analogies (Avant-Garde Film and the Other Arts)* (Vera Frenkel—moderator, Noel Carroll, Michael Snow, Stan Brakhage, Joao Luiz Vieira).

CRITICS' SIDEBARS: Critical and theoretical papers culled from submissions in response to an open call will be read and debated.

OPEN SCREENINGS: free screen time for Congress participants.

For more information, contact:

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