

Film Reviews

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 domineering patriarch, the bewildered feminine, 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 grasping at images of her dead brother. Lance (Michael McManus) moves in a semi-catatonic state from room to room in a luxury hotel changing sheets. Lisa (Arsinée Khanjian), 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 swath 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 confers with the distant Producer (David Hemblen) through a video link. Lance leaves his picture and resumé in 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 grander Big Brother, murmurs reassuring words and commands from the giant monitor.

At the video shop, Eddy (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 repeats it for Clara after she auditions him. Lance gets the part, his first speaking part, while Clara is being eased out of the picture, erased and mutilated by the Producer, who rewrites 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



Michael McManus as Lance

liaison. Illicit because of the electronic media's usurpation of the sexual; and illicit 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 obverse 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 groom to aggression with the intensity of her video questioning about the nature of love. The enigma of love is a hidden theme in the film. Clara's brother loved her sister to the point of sacrificing a lung and then a life for her; she loves him and writes a film in homage to his sacrifice, and extends that love to his lookalike Lance. Lisa defines herself through her love for Lance. For both women, the loved one escapes them and is recaptured only in video. In room 106, an unknown woman kills herself for love of Lance. Presumably, she didn't have the consolation of video.

The men, however, love no one. Eddy records impassively; orgies and weddings are alike to him. The Producer is a controller of images. "Do you know who I am? If you watched television, you watched my shows," he tells Lance in an outburst of self-definition whose boundaries include all who have consumed his images. Lance, with his bisexual looks, stands poised and paralyzed between female and male. He neither watches nor makes images. He waits to be assigned his speaking part.

Clara, desperate that the film remain true to

the story, begs Lance to do something. But Lance can only keep his speaking part if he remains silent. Lisa is silent about Lance's connection to the death in room 106, despite having seen him emerge from that room. Clara retreats to the video mausoleum; Lisa to her room with another Lance video, while Lance readies himself for the first scene in his speaking part: a talk show whose host is played by the Producer, and whose topic is organ transplants. In a crescendo of rising tension, the film cuts from Lance to Clara to Lisa who, under the pressure of unresolved emotions, begin to video-hallucinate. The crescendo ends in the final explosive moment when Lance shouts no to his speaking part and the patriarchal lie.

In *Speaking Parts*, Egoyan has married a concern with the weight of the image to the weight 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 Lance and Lisa begin to establish what is true or right, and video also serves the function of memory. In *Family Viewing*, it was the archive of the family, those images which in linking one to the past, kept one human. In *Speaking Parts*, the memory of the brother is preserved in video and reminds Clara and us of what is true against the lies of the Producer. But video can also be corruptive and expressive of patriarchal power relationships, particularly as used by the

Producer to control Clara and the film.

A cold film, *Speaking Parts* eschews audience involvement for more intellectual pleasures: an intricate construct within a finely balanced structure. In the confines of the rigorous stylization, 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 Perlmutter •

SPEAKING PARTS p. Ego Film Arts w./d. Atom Egoyan d.o.p. Paul Sarossy m. Mycheal Danna art d. Linda Del Rosario ed. Bruce McDonald sd. ed. Steven Munro sc. ed. Allen Bell line p./p. m. Camelia Frieberg exec. p. (Europe) Don Ranvaud 1st asst. d. David Webb 2nd asst. d. Cynthia Gillespie 3rd asst. d. Paul Smith p. lawyer Martin Kryz p. co-ord. Bill Sweetman p. acc. Maria Pimentel asst. art d. Richard Paris asst. to art d. Sandra Smolksi ward. co-ord. Maureen Del Degan hair Moira Verwijk m-up art. Nicole Demers set dec. § props Theresa Santandrea-Cull asst. set dec. Gavin Coford asst. ward. Robert Fenwick set § prop. const. Richard Paris asst. set const. Gavin Coford scenic paint. Jason Davis wig des. Cindy Emery gaff. David Owen best boy Tony Ramsey key grip Cynthia Barlow asst. grip David Patrick 1st asst. cam. David Plank 2nd asst. cam. Paul Boucher sd. rec. John Megill boom Peter Melnychuk sc. sup. Monika Gagnon stills Johnnie Eizen 24 frame vid. op. Cliff Lopes vid. co-ord. Bill Sweetman d. obs. Jordan Merkur loc. mgr. Ruth Mandel cast co-ord. Rose Gutierrez extras cast. Glen Schultz, Scott Mansfield p. a. Naomi Boxer craft Avant Gout, Heather McMillan art dept. p. a. Melinda Hector, Rick Conroy, James Butfin, Beth Patrick, John Wojkowski co-ed. Atom Egoyan dir. ed. Micheal Werth 1st asst. ed. David Trevis 2nd asst. ed. Kim Roseborough Foley art. Steve Munro re-rec. mix. Daniel Pellenin, Film House title Metamedia film timer Chris Hinton film proc. Medallion Film, Video ltd. l. p. Micheal McManus, Arsinée Khanjian, Gabrielle Rose, Tony Nardi, David Hemblen, Patricia Collins, Gerard Parkes, Jackie Samuda, Peter Krantz, Frank Tata, Patrick Tierney, Robert Dodds, Leslek Lis, Sharon Corder, David MacKay.