

How Do We
Know What
We Know?
Atom Egoyan's
*Where
the
Truth
Lies*

By Tom McSorley

“People are always interested to know what they look like when they are pretending.” Leonard Cohen to Donald Brittain in *Ladies and Gentlemen... Mr. Leonard Cohen*

Eighteenth-century Irish philosopher George “Bishop” Berkeley would have loved the films of Atom Egoyan. Berkeley’s famous dictum *Esse est percipi*, which translates as “to be is to be perceived,” describes not only an organizing principle in the material construction and experience of cinema itself, but also the dominant animating energy of Egoyan’s dramas of knowledge and identity. Indeed, fundamentally the cinema of Atom Egoyan is a set of epistemological investigations. All of his films, in one way or another, orbit around a single enormous question: How do we know what we know?

This uncertainty, the idea of not being sure, is the most productive formal and thematic strand in Egoyan’s work, from the reinvention of identity in *Next of Kin* to the self-conscious character artifices in *Speaking Parts* and *The Adjuster*, to the technologically mediated relationships in *Family Viewing* and *Calendar*, to the jigsaw puzzles of time and memory in *Exotica* and *The Sweet Hereafter*, to the interrogations of personal and political history in *Ararat*. At once affirming and contesting Berkeley’s assertion, Egoyan’s gnarled cinema of uncertainty explores fugitive personal cartographies of who we think we are, who others think we are, who we might actually be or who it is we are pretending to be. In over two decades of work, Egoyan has sculpted an idiosyncratic and engaging filmography out of the often opaque mysteries of knowing or, more precisely, of not knowing.

While undeniably more commercial in tone and generic in construction than his previous films, *Where the Truth Lies*, Egoyan’s 10th theatrical

Alison Lohman

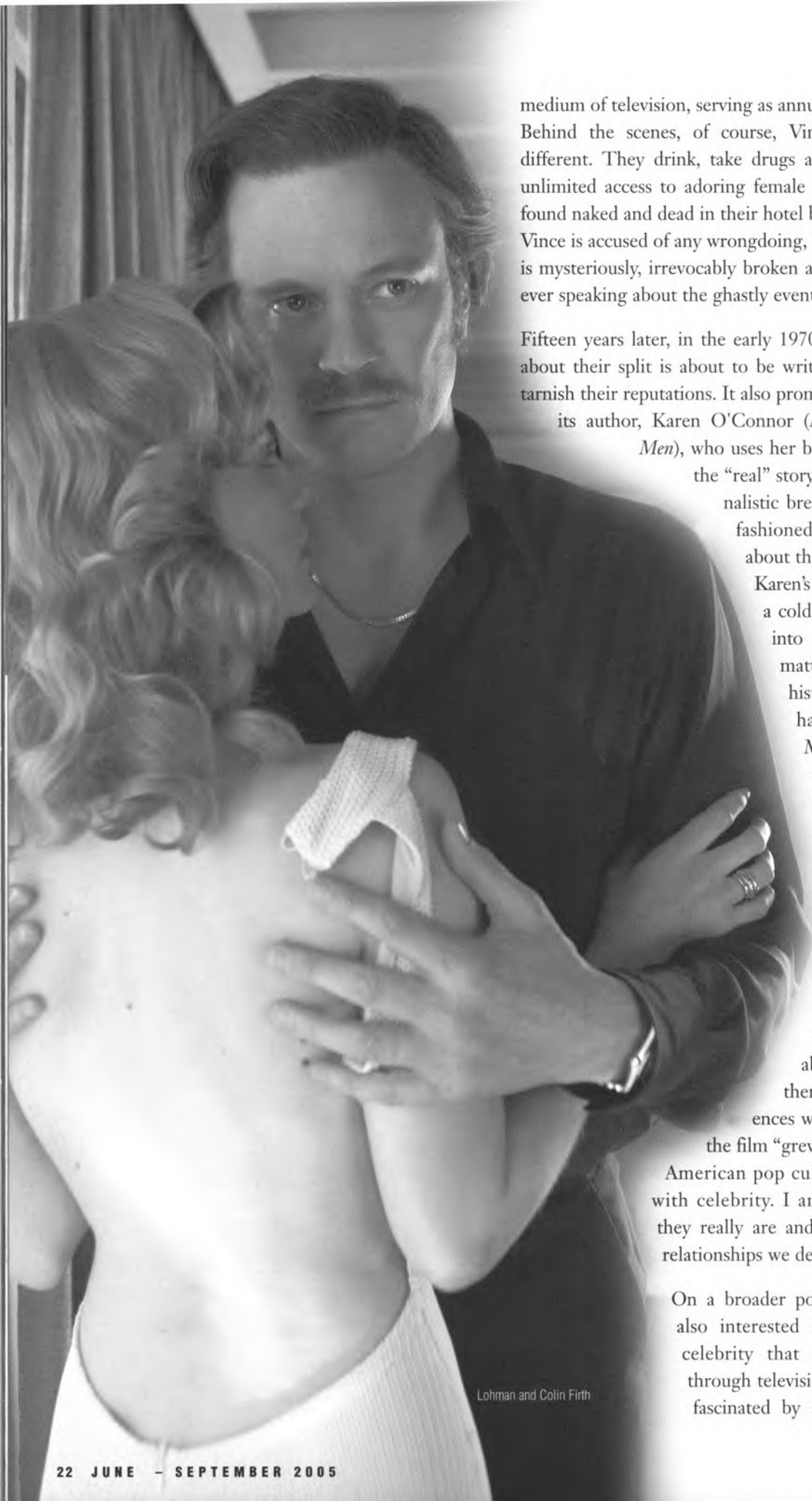
feature, is nonetheless a continuation of his examination of the fissures in the foundations of how we come to know ourselves, each other, and, specifically in this new film, those pervasive and strangely intimate presences in our lives, celebrities. When you are a celebrity, after all, to be really *is* to be perceived. Moreover, as Canadian icon Leonard Cohen rightly observes in Donald Brittain and Don Owen's 1965 NFB short *Ladies and Gentlemen... Mr. Leonard Cohen*, much of the peculiar and particular

world of celebrity involves pretense, and a desire to know how one appears while pretending, in order to better manipulate the pretense. It is within this notion that *Where the Truth Lies* finds its dramatic core, a core informed, once again, by Egoyan's fascination with the processes by which we come to know what we know. In our phantasmagoric age of reality television, omnivorous entertainment media and relentless celebrity reportage, the accelerated blurring of the line between what is manipulated perception and what actually is real makes Egoyan's approach both timely and—if such a thing can be said in our hipper-than-thou, I've-seen-it-all popular culture—helpful.

Adapted from the best-selling novel by Rupert Holmes (a former singer/songwriter turned jingle writer turned novelist) and produced by Robert Lantos (*Sunshine, Being Julia*), *Where the Truth Lies* is Egoyan's biggest-budget film to date, at just over US \$20 million. Bolstered by international stars Kevin Bacon (*Mystic River, Footloose*) and Colin Firth (*Girl with a Pearl Earring, Bridget Jones's Diary*), it was filmed over a 10-week period on location in Los Angeles and on studio sets in London and Toronto. A film noirish whodunit that explores Hollywood's myth-making machine, *Where the Truth Lies* chronicles, with multiple voice-over narration and multiple time-shifts, the careers and personae of Vince Collins (Firth) and Lanny Morris (Bacon), a show-business team of the 1950s whose brush with scandal leads to their breakup.

At the outset, they are the quintessential successful comedy duo of the 1950s—Vince is the straight man; Lanny, the nice-guy, goofy sidekick. They are movie stars and they sell-out clubs all over the United States, not unlike the real-life team of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. They even dominate the new





medium of television, serving as annual hosts of a polio telethon. Behind the scenes, of course, Vince and Lanny are much different. They drink, take drugs and particularly enjoy their unlimited access to adoring female fans—until one of them is found naked and dead in their hotel bathtub. Neither Lanny nor Vince is accused of any wrongdoing, but the bond between them is mysteriously, irrevocably broken and years pass without their ever speaking about the ghastly event.

Fifteen years later, in the early 1970s, a book revealing secrets about their split is about to be written, threatening to further tarnish their reputations. It also promises to launch the career of its author, Karen O'Connor (Alison Lohman, *Matchstick Men*), who uses her body and her mind to get at the "real" story. One of an emerging journalistic breed with no regard for old-fashioned discretion when writing about the private lives of celebrities, Karen's professional agenda is to turn a cold case about two fallen stars into a hot story. Complicating matters further is her personal history. As a young girl, Karen had been a huge Collins/Morris fan. When she meets them and develops feelings for them, her journalistic methods become increasingly questionable.

For Egoyan, the Holmes novel was rife with possibilities about a world where the difference between being and being perceived can be considerable, both for the performers themselves and for the audiences who watch them. As he says, the film "grew out of my fascination with American pop culture and our relationship with celebrity. I am curious to explore who they really are and who we really are in the relationships we develop with them."

On a broader pop-culture level, Egoyan is also interested in the particular kind of celebrity that the 1950s' manufactured through television. He observes, "I am also fascinated by a media context in which

Lohman and Colin Firth

Where the Truth Lies “grew out of my fascination with American pop culture and our relationship with celebrity.” – Atom Egoyan

everyone was watching the same thing. The idea of collective consciousness really could exist in some way in relation to television in those days. Beyond that, the fundraising telethon, which is really the spine of the narrative, was and is still a test of celebrity endurance, where they become, in some strange way, superhuman. This world of celebrity is so measured and self-consciously constructed. I am excited by this idea of the construction of character—how do the characters we are watching construct themselves, which in turn asks us to examine how we construct ourselves?”

The notion of construction informs Egoyan’s approach to film style, as well. As he says, “Unlike Abbas Kiarostami or Mike Leigh, directors who observe ‘reality’ in some fashion that aspires to an unmediated treatment of the real, I was and I am always aware of the construction of things, and I always make that part of the dramaturgy of my stories. It’s no better or more ‘real’; it’s just the way I work.” And, he continues, it is why he loves film noir. “Of course, all the characters in noir are involved in the process of construction, either by misrepresenting themselves, deceiving others or trying to determine and/or control how they are perceived. This is what Lanny is doing, for example.

He is trying to determine the story, to create ‘the definitive version’ of what happened. Karen, obviously, is trying to determine and render her own version, so all of the characters are caught up in trying to make, or even control and dominate an idea of knowing the truth.”

This dovetails into Egoyan’s thematic and stylistic preoccupation with the idea of how knowledge itself is constructed, how it is to be located. After all, especially in the world of movies and television, things are not what they seem. As he observes, the characters in *Where the Truth Lies* “are all engaged in the process of trying to understand a moment that changed their lives. I am attracted to the interpersonal tensions of what someone else needs you to believe to further his or her own agenda.”

Yet in all this whirl of epistemological uncertainty in many aspects of the story, Egoyan reveals a certain unease in respecting the narrative imperatives of noir. The genre conventions he has chosen to work with are also shaped, to a degree, by the commercial contours of *Where the Truth Lies*. “I am frustrated with having to structure explanations, and don’t like films that wrap things up, like the endings of *Psycho* and *Vertigo*. I prefer to leave mystery



intact, but I also recognize that audiences are not always engaged by that unresolved narrative strategy. The element of the whodunnit in noir fiction is pleasurable; you know, that need to have answered who actually did do it? But for me, it's a treacherous moment in the film because I am more attracted by this idea of non-explanation. Genre films demand a resolution, so it's a negotiation, and the danger is that the form of the genre, its conventions, may trivialize the ideas it's trying to express."



Atom Egoyan and producer Robert Lantos

course, it all depends on the story you want to tell." Both within the fictional worlds of the films and in the world of materially producing them, then, there is for Egoyan the writer/director and Egoyan the producer always the reality that part of the story being told is how

it will be told. Where all this will take his career as an imagemaker remains to be seen.

At the troubled heart of Egoyan's work, the primary creative tension that propels his dramas is that perception

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Beyond the matter of a more commercial narrative approach, Egoyan also acknowledges that after the intense and daunting *Ararat* project, he needed to work on something less personal. "This film is a change of gears for me. I wanted to do a kind of homage to a film genre—film noir—that has had a huge influence on my experience of cinema in the first place." With this in mind, Egoyan muses about the nature of filmmaking in Canada in 2005. "The middle film—something like *The Adjuster*, let's say—is hard to do these days. Once you are involved at a certain budget level you have to perform in a different, perhaps more restrictive way. It seems it's either bigger budget stuff or something totally handmade, like *Citadel* [a digital feature Egoyan made with his partner Arsinée Khanjian]. That middle film is harder and harder to make." He pauses for a moment, adding, "Of

and being are, *pace* Berkeley, not the same. There is always more, and sometimes less, to the picture than meets the eye. One is not necessarily how one is perceived, as Lanny, Vince and Karen recognize so clearly. Indeed, from 1984's *Next of Kin* to *Where the Truth Lies*, Egoyan's restless imagination continues to travel along those many fissures between what is, and what is perceived, both onscreen in the narratives and characters and, by extension, out there in the dark in our tangled, uncertain relationship to the

ephemeral, chimerical world of moving images. In the cinema of Atom Egoyan, even in a more commercial example such as *Where the Truth Lies*, to become aware of these fissures, these uncertainties and what we do not know is, paradoxically, to understand.

Tom McSorley is *Take One's* associate editor and a member of its editorial board.



Colin Firth and Kevin Bacon on the set of *Where the Truth Lies*