

Egoyan's Speaking Parts

By Tom McSorley

Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges once wrote that his literary impulses arose out of a sense of astonishment, a profound wonder at the world around him. For Borges, the artist's primary question must be: why are things the way they are? Well, north of Buenos Aires, another artist is making similar investigations. Toronto-based director Atom Egoyan has fashioned, in a remarkably short period of time, an accomplished group of films which are powered by that same sense of astonishment, that same daunting question. Egoyan's frequently brilliant and always engaging work, located somewhere between Marshall McLuhan and Michelangelo Antonioni, wonders about the technocentric, image-saturated media maelstrom that is late 20th-century North American culture. In films such as *Next of Kin* (1984), *Family Viewing* (1987), *Speaking Parts* (1989), *The Adjuster* (1991), and *Calendar* (1993), Atom Egoyan has produced, out of his own astonishment at how the world operates, consistently intelligent, thoughtful, even troubling dramas about contemporary experience.

Beyond this, however, and given the dearth of publishing on English Canadian cinema since the demise of the Canadian Film Institute's valuable publication series in the early 1980s, there is now a more tangible layer of astonishment to add to the Egoyan emergence—a book. Edited by Toronto critic and programmer Marc Glassman, and published by Coach House Press, *Speaking Parts* is a striking new volume which contains the screenplay of Egoyan's 1989 feature drama about the personal and technological entanglements of an actor, a lonely and obsessive fan, a screenwriter, and a producer. Along with the screenplay are also several intriguing companion pieces.

The book consists of various parts, each of which "speaks" in different ways

about *Speaking Parts* in particular, and about Egoyan's precocious cinematic achievements in general. McGill University professor and cultural commentator Ron Burnett opens the book with a perceptive introduction to the film's many layers of mediated imagery and self-consciousness. He argues, persuasively, that this film (like all of Egoyan's movies, I hasten to add) "opens up a whole series of questions about images, about the complexity of sign systems, about where images come from, about the links between thought and sight, sensation and memory." Burnett's rigorous introduction is followed by an essay by Egoyan himself. Entitled "Surface Tension," it is a suggestive, if somewhat brief (this from a man who admits he "tends to over-articulate things") examination of notions of surface and illusion in cinema. Complementing this is an extended (but still too short!) interview, offering glimpses of Egoyan's creative processes and production methods, as

script. One of the pleasant surprises is how this visually ornate, verbally restrained film about a world of images and surfaces "translates" well to the printed page. Moreover, Greg Van Alstyne's superb design incorporates many of *Speaking Parts*' images into the text, reinforcing the film's exploration of relationships between image, language, and identity. Next to this impressively designed volume, recent publications like *The Five Best Canadian Screenplays* barely rise above mere photocopying.

In an era when directors like Spike Lee have four books in print about a career of only six films, it is heartening—no, essential—that a book like this exists about one of Canada's most important filmmakers. Not so astonishing when we remember where we are; this is the only text in English to date which has dealt with the new wave of English Canadian feature filmmaking in the last decade. This fact makes the arrival of this excellent book even more valuable.



**Michael McManus
in *Speaking Parts***

**Between Marshall
McLuhan and
Michelangelo
Antonioni**

well as his approach to actors and, more philosophically, to the peculiarly powerful and pervasive medium in which he works. The book also contains a complete filmography of Egoyan's work up to his most recent feature, *Calendar*.

The majority of the book's 176 pages, of course, is taken up with the actual screenplay of *Speaking Parts*. It is lavishly illustrated with production stills, Egoyan's own storyboard sketches, and fragments of the original typed manu-

One can only hope that its publication will jump-start a series of much-needed texts on recent Canadian cinema. It is a lot to hope for, but perhaps the presence of *Speaking Parts* will astonish us enough to rephrase Borges' question into an inquiry about why there are so few books on contemporary Canadian cinema and, having asked the question, we will then set out to answer it •

Speaking Parts, Coach House Press, Toronto, 1993. 176pp. \$ 19.95