

Program note for **Pinewood Dialogue with Atom Egoyan** and screening of ***Exotica***

March 12, 1995

Series: *Atom Egoyan*

EXOTICA

Alliance/Miramax Films, 1994, 104 mins, 35mm print courtesy of Miramax Films. Written and directed by Atom Egoyan. Produced by Atom Egoyan and Camilla Frieberg. Photographed by Paul Sarossy. Edited by Susan Shipton. Original score by Mychael Danna. Production design by Linda Del Rosario and Richard Paris. With Bruce Greenwood (Francis), Mia Kirshner (Christina), Don McKellar (Thomas), Arsinee Khanjian (Zoe), Eric (Elias Koteas), Sarah Polley (Tracey), Victor Garber (Harold).

"I have great suspicions about conveying screen emotion. It's my feeling that it can be too easy to just fix the camera on someone going through emotional turmoil. There's something very disturbing about that for me, about my reasons for doing it. I strive to find a structure that allows me to address my own suspicions and still communicate an emotional story. A cinematic moment can transcend its limitations as an image and work its way into a viewer's subconscious only if the viewer is able to 'frame' the image... That is, the viewer must consciously acknowledge that he is observing an image, and must make an active self-conscious decision to absorb it. By making this enormous conceptual leap, the viewer identifies with the image and forms a passage of exchange. The screen becomes a surface. ...To what extent can one trust that someone else will... 'feel someone else feeling you' when those feelings are mediated, when they have filters and screens? That 's what truly interests me in the film [Speaking Parts], not the mixing of video and film technologies. To what extent can one trust one's identity to someone else feeling what that identity is about?" -Atom Egoyan

By David Schwartz, Chief Curator of Film

Undeniably seductive and accomplished, Atom Egoyan's new movie *Exotica* set a new theater box-office record last week (March 3-9) in its exclusive run at the Angelika

Film Center and seems to be on its way to fulfilling its promise as a commercial breakthrough for one of the most interesting and impressive directors now working.

With its hothouse atmosphere and relatively classic narrative style, *Exotica* is Egoyan's most deceptively straightforward movie to date. (Although as always with Egoyan, the plot consists of parallel story lines that ultimately converge—a fugal structure that the director attributes both to his musical training and his childhood habit of channel hopping while watching television.) Defying categorization and defined by their rigorous experimentation, his earlier works combined video and film techniques in a modernist approach that always raised questions about the nature of moving images while at the same time telling intensely emotional stories.

The alienating effects of modern technology seemed to be a key subject, accentuated by the director's fascination with emotionally sterile locations (mainly airports and hotels), the stultifying repression of bourgeois family life, and the deadening effects of repetitious jobs. But in fact, as *Exotica* shows, Egoyan's modernist deconstruction of medium was always at the service of deeper concerns.

In his 1981 short *Peep Show*, a man enters a photo booth and takes a series of self-portraits that gradually reveal his sexual fantasies. At one point, the camera moves towards the photo-booth curtain and swoops underneath, taking us inside the private area. The revelatory power of photography (despite its cool, mechanical aspect) and the movement between public and private space are clearly stated in this ambitiously experimental short, which uses complex optical printing techniques to express the character's subjectivity.

Intimacy is always problematic in Egoyan's work. His first feature, *Next of Kin*, has a remarkable premise: a young man who is undergoing videotaped family therapy decides to abandon his parents and present himself to a working class Armenian couple as their long-lost son. He enters their world and in this newly created, artificial situation, experiences a sense of freedom and love that he never could attain with his real family. Egoyan's characters are often trapped in roles that are determined by their personal histories yet which alienate them from their true selves. Intimacy must always be earned, and often takes the form of an artificial construct.

As Egoyan has noted, there is "a certain pattern, which I seem to have established for male leads. They are always people who drift through space without ever knowing their potential to affect other people." As different as his movies are in their formal approaches, they all include a male character who oversteps an unspoken boundary to insinuate himself into someone else's life. In *Family Viewing*, a young man with a tortured relationship to his father imposes himself on a woman he meets at a nursing home by (not to reveal too much about the plot) an exceedingly presumptuous swap of corpses. *Speaking Parts* features an ambitious actor who works as a combination housekeeper/gigolo at a hotel and deceitfully imposes his way into a relationship with a screenwriter to win a part in a movie. In *The Adjuster*, a man whose job requires him to take care of the financial needs of his clients, who have all just gone through a traumatic experiences, becomes an odd mythical figure who gets enmeshed in symbiotic sexual relationships with his female clients. In the ironic pseudo-self portrait *Calendar*, an Armenian tour guide plays a crucial role in the breakup of the relationship between a photographer (played by Egoyan) and his wife. And in *Exotica*, a tax auditor haunted by his past enters an elaborately controlled fantasy world-and goes just a step too far.

To focus on this particular psychological strand in Egoyan's films is to stress an emotional consistency beneath the wonderfully strange, formally rigorous, deeply challenging surfaces of the films. "The idea of surface, when associated with the depiction of character, suggest superficiality and lack of dimension. We tend to think of a surface as something that is without depth, something that offers nothing more than what is immediately visible," writes Egoyan. "On closer reading, however, the concept of surface proves to be the most complex and intriguing aspect of any rendering of personality."

There is a compulsive need to look, to control what one sees, in many of Egoyan's characters. While this is often manifested in an obsession with videotapes and cameras, *Exotica* takes this compulsion beyond the realm of technological apparatus, creating a physical place-the nightclub *Exotica*-which is a perfect metaphor for a movie theater, a place where we can look but can't touch, where we share a public experience that works on a most private level.

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