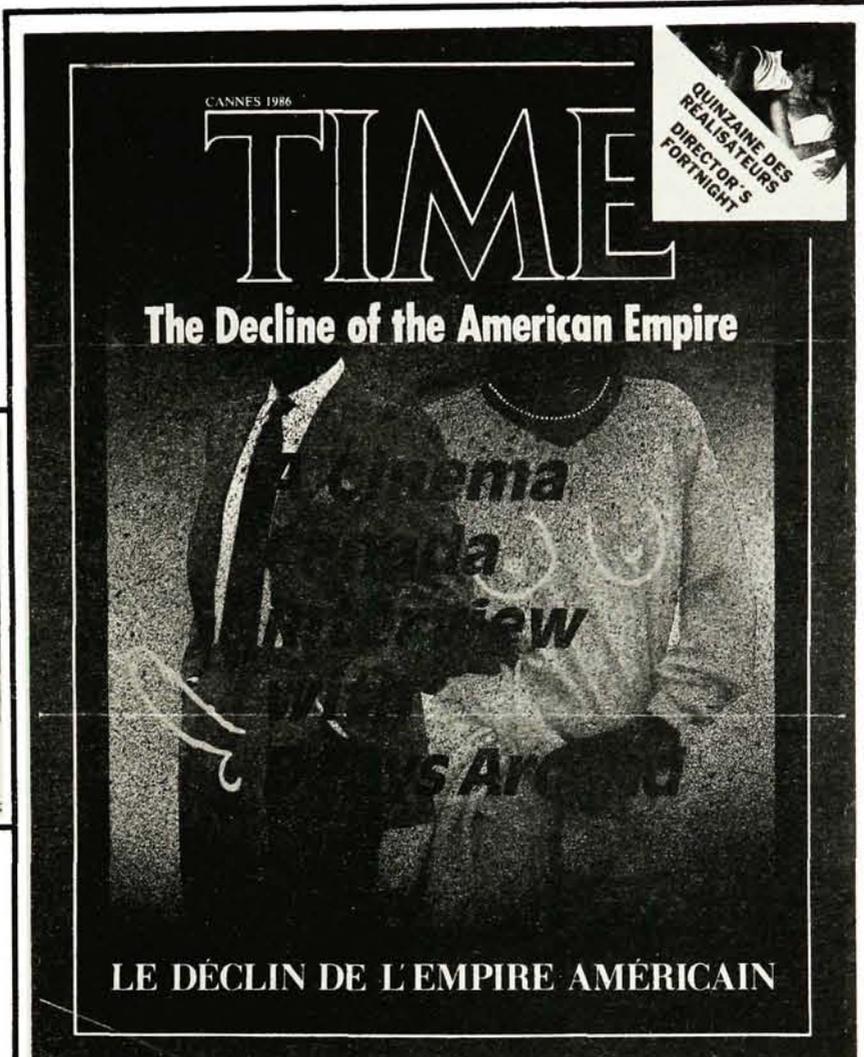


Renaissance man



‘It seems to me that the first attribute of humanity is intelligence,’ says Arcand in the interview below, ‘and that’s what distinguishes people from animals.’ Intelligence. That’s Denys Arcand in one word, and what distinguishes Arcand’s films from the bulk of Canadian cinema. And fittingly Arcand’s fifth feature, *Le Déclin de l’empire américain*, is well on its way to becoming, both critically and commercially, the most successful Canadian film ever, and the first Canadian feature to open the Toronto Festival of Festivals as a whole.

For 20 years, Arcand has been at the forefront of Canadian and Quebec cinema’s difficult transition from the documentary to a filmic expressionism that, together with its increasing mastery of narrative form, embodies at the same time the continuation of the historical and ethical emphases that are so characteristic of the Canadian intellect.

After all, Arcand is the maker of *On est au coton* (1970), the greatest political documentary in Canadian cinema, just as he is the author of the first film noir in Canadian cinema, *La Maudite galette* (1972), Arcand’s first venture into dramatic features.

Running parallel tracks between fiction – *Réjeanne Padovani*, (1973), a study of political corruption in the construction industry; *Gina* (1974), a stripper’s one-woman battle to escape the cycle of exploitation she’s trapped in; *Empire Inc.’s* (1982) probing of the psychology of Canadian capitalism, or *Le Crime d’Ovide Plouffe* (1983), a cynical portrayal of the rise of Quebec’s modern entrepreneurial class – and documentary – *Québec: Duplessis et après* (1972) on the continuation of *Duplèssisme* in modern Quebec nationalism or *Le Confort et l’indifférence*, a Machiavellian study of the 1980 Referendum – Arcand’s acerbic eye has carefully observed the absurd contradictions of Canadian existence, politics and culture – yet always with resigned affection.

Now, in *Le Déclin de l’empire américain*, the Arcandian *regard*, while remaining deeply rooted in Canada, embraces a contemporary moment in the world-wide war between the sexes that, perhaps more than intelligence, might, in fact, be the first attribute of humankind.

In the following *Cinema Canada* interview with Associate Editor Michael Dorland, Arcand talks about decline, the making of *Le Déclin*, the Canadian *différance*, the renaissance that’s currently taking place in Canadian and Quebec cinema, and why it’s taken 20 years to get from then to now.

Cinema Canada: *The English-Canadian philosopher George Grant once characterised the American Empire as "Orgasm at home; napalm abroad." Yet Canada is gambling the little independence it has left within that empire which meanwhile at the cultural level, and these days that means television, is undergoing a tremendous global expansion. What's your theory of the decline of this empire?*

Denys Arcand: My theory is that now, or at least since the Korean War, we have begun to live what I call the beginning of the decline. That is, if one wants to make comparisons with, say, the Roman Empire, which are the easiest and the stupidest in a way, we have seen the limits of that empire.

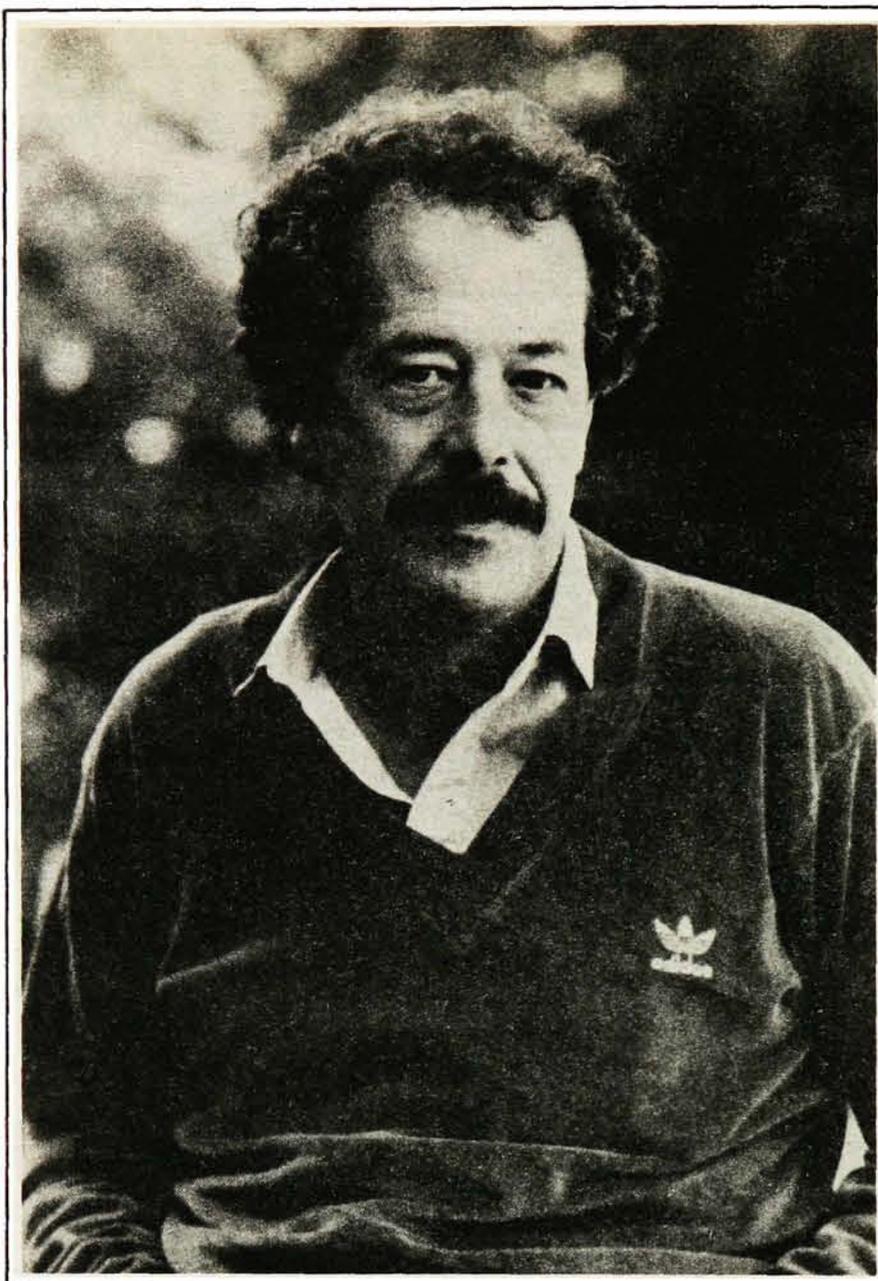
The American Empire reached its apogee in 1945; that is, after the Second World War when they had to all extents and purposes conquered the world. They had no rival. The Soviet Union was on its back; there was nothing else: America was the sovereign empire. But from the time of the Korean War, from that first stalemate, that was the end. The Americans negotiated and after that, there was Cuba; there was, of course, Vietnam; now there is Latin America.

On the industrial level, there's the entire Pacific Rim: there is no longer a television set made in the United States, nor a sound system, nor a Walkman. Sure, the U.S. is still a sovereign country, heavily armed and capable of domination, but there are fissures.

How long could the decline last? I don't know; it could last three centuries. The end is not for tomorrow nor next week. A moment ago, we were laughing at the *Newsweek* photo-spread on the Statue of Liberty. Once, we wouldn't have laughed. We would have said: 'It's true; it's the land of liberty.' And it *was* true. It was even the dream of intellectuals during the Nazi menace and, whether it was Bertolt Brecht or Ernst Lubitsch or Murnau, all of whom went to Hollywood, that was the voice, the land of refuge. It isn't anymore, even intellectually. Maybe it's pleasant to work in Hollywood but I know guys who are film professors at UCLA and they have to keep a gun in their glove-compartment because, between where they live and the hills, they have to drive through Chicano or Latin neighborhoods, and that's dangerous. So they're armed. And I don't know if I'd want to live like that.

So that's the beginning of the decline, plus all the elements I mention in the film. They couldn't draft anyone to fight in Nicaragua: no one would turn up. So they engage in wars by proxy. They give millions to the Contras, which was what the Roman Empire did. In the second century before Christ, the Romans paid the Gauls to fight the Visigoths because the Roman citizens were at the games or in their swimming pools. That's what the original Roman Republic, the *Senatus populusque romanus*, had become; once, they were like the Americans GIs that went off to topple the Germans or the Japanese in 1940. That doesn't exist anymore.

Cinema Canada: *There's still the empire at the level of film content, at the level of distribution. I'll read you a sentence that was in *Le Monde* in an*



Photos: Lois Siegel

The heart of the matter is that at the height of the American Empire they objectively had all the best writers, the best musicians and the best filmmakers. That's no longer true.

article on recent American cinema: "Nuclear war will not be the end of the world, but a step towards the creation of a society that's better adapted to real Americans." If that's the content of their cinema, how do you see that in terms of decline - since all this is happening entirely at a symbolic level. Is this the cultural form of the proxy wars you just mentioned?

Denys Arcand: It's a fact that the instrument by which they have profoundly influenced the world has been - and I don't want to use the word 'product' - by means of a cultural production that was once of very high quality.

Take American music - jazz - which is absolutely fantastic music, probably the most extraordinary form of musical expression of the 20th century. Jazz took over the world and after that the sub-products of jazz, pop music and things like that, also took over the world. Americans don't have the

monopoly on that anymore. Yes they still have a monopoly in distribution, in packaging, in marketing, but these are, one could say, almost artificial phenomena. Very artificial but also very important because, effectively, it can indeed invade our lives and control a whole part, or at least harm the national production of many other countries. But that's not the heart of the matter.

The heart of the matter is that at the height of the American Empire, they objectively had all the best writers, the best musicians and the best filmmakers. Now, it's no longer true that someone like Steven Spielberg is one of the world's best filmmakers. He's a good filmmaker if only for a certain visual and physical ability, but he's not a great filmmaker. He's not someone who speaks to me. He's a "p'tit cul" from an American suburb, a bright kid. He doesn't speak to me like John Ford who made *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*. Now there's someone who

speaks to me. That's a man with a voice. But I don't define myself in relation to American cinema. If I look back at the past 20 years, it's not that that has touched me the most. Whereas when I go see Ingmar Bergman's *After The Rehearsal*, I'm a thousand times more influenced, touched or troubled than by the bulk of American cinema.

Cinema Canada: *At the end of the Déclin, there's a shot of the lake early in the morning with the bullrushes rising out of the water - that's a nod to Perrault, isn't it?*

Denys Arcand: No, not at all, no, no...

Cinema Canada: *I had the sense at the end that you very quickly made a series of references to the heart of Quebec cinema with its images of nature, with that ending of snow and winter.*

Denys Arcand: That's true, but it's not specifically a nod to Perrault, even though I rather like Perrault. On the one hand, yes, it's us, but on the other, these are scenes that come at the end of a film entirely centred on speech, entirely centred on such preoccupations as 'Did Mr So-and-So sleep with Mrs So-and-So?' and, after having slept together, 'Did she prefer this one or that one?' So I wanted images that say: yes, but when they'll all be dead, there will still be the lake; another season; the falling snow; Lake Memphremagog will still be there after these people have disappeared. All these things are ephemeral - all this, these affairs.

Yet there is the notion for me that *this is us* in that small scene at night after they've just had a last drink and they ask themselves, if there was a nuclear explosion in the United States, whether they would see the glow. For me, that's what's specifically Canadian. For me, that's Canadians: sitting on the terrace, watching the United States blow up.

If we keep the parallel with the Roman Empire, we're the Etruscans on the margins of empire, on the steps of the empire.

Here, we're just spectators. And all of Canadian policy at bottom is a reflection of that: always trying to demarcate ourselves a little. We're so close to them we can't do otherwise than go along with them somewhat, but on the other hand we're different; our international image is different, and we play on that.

Cinema Canada: *How does that work in Canadian cinema, that marginality, according to you? I understand marginality on two levels: one is the marginality that's resentful because it is on the outside, but there's also a positive sense, that of a creative marginality. If your films are conscious of that, how much of that consciousness is there in Canadian cinema, and I include Québécois cinema? How much consciousness of that do you see in the political spheres and in the overall orientations of the development of a Canadian film industry?*

Denys Arcand: I don't know if there is any consciousness... it's very strange. It's too vast a question. There are always two things that have to be distinguished - the relationship of French-Canada to the U.S. is very different from that of En-

glish-Canada. There is a fundamental difference. French-Canadians, aside from watching American TV or going on vacation to Ogunquit or Florida, don't have the same fascination because they belong to a different culture; they don't even see the same danger of being absorbed by American culture...

You have to have seen the Québécois section of Miami, which is unbelievable! I'd love to do a film on that one day. There is a part of North Miami that's completely Québécois. You get your Molson, your *Journal de Montréal* on the stands the same day; there are even motels where they've had to hire Québécois employees because only French is spoken. And I've been told about people going into stores and when they find no French spoken, demanding Bill 101!

And that's the reality. They're completely at home. Just like in Maine – in Kennenbunkport, Ogunquit, or Old Orchard. There's no problem. They don't speak the language and that saves them in a way.

Personally the difference strikes me when I read the cultural pages of Canadian newspapers. It's a part of my work, so I'll read the cultural pages of the *Gazette* and the *Globe & Mail* and 80 per cent of the content is directly related to the U.S.: Broadway shows, American things, or at best a Canadian angle about "Our boy who made good in L.A." And he was a success because first he made *Porky's* and then he went down there, as if going down there is automatic.

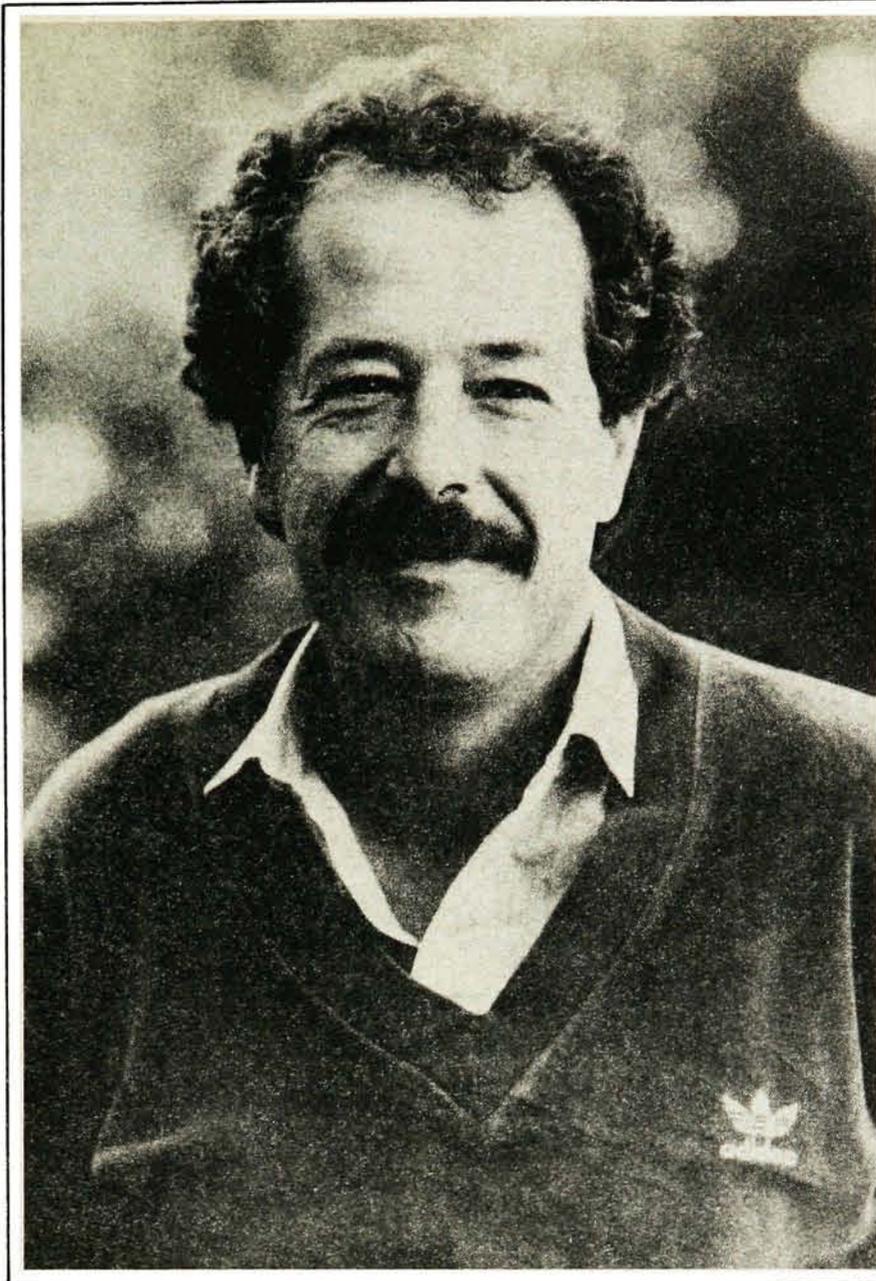
But the Québécois, because he speaks another language and because there's still an influence from France, if you look at the cultural pages of *La Presse* or *Le Devoir*, American references are very rare. They are there, but they don't directly affect anyone.

The first time I really worked in English-Canada, for CBC in Toronto, was when we made the series *Empire*. That was my first contact with English-Canadian actors and the first thing that strikes you is they all have agents. Even very young actors just getting started, all have agents, which is the American way. There isn't a single Québécois actor who has an agent. You call them at home and say, 'Look, I'm doing a film, are you coming aboard?' and they might want to discuss the contract, but there's no agent. The others all have an agent who's in contact with another agent in Hollywood and they're all hoping for the big break that'll get them down there. It's all oriented towards that, towards the outside.

Here, nobody is oriented towards anything. We're here, and we're here for good, and so one tries to get by and do one's best. So, in that sense, to answer a part of your question, the difference is very, very striking.

Don Shebib, the English-Canadian filmmaker, is a friend of mine and I've often been struck by the extent of the American dream in his films. One of his films, *Between Friends*, opens with images of surfers at Malibu Beach Hill. Don's a guy who went to UCLA, who went to the American school of filmmaking, so for him California isn't a myth; it's something that's present and it remains present.

Cinema Canada: *There's a reference to that in the film, I think, to the effect*



If we keep the parallel with the Roman Empire, we're the Etruscans on the margins of empire, on the steps of the empire. When the barbarians come by, they won't stop here; they'll go straight past us and into the empire.

that we speak French and so we can't go anywhere else. We're here and we have to make do.

Denys Arcand: That's not in the film. Maybe it's something I said once somewhere, but it isn't in the film because in that film, for once, I tried to remove all reference to the fact that these are French-Canadians or Québécois. Maybe something got by me.

Cinema Canada: *There's a reference to Brossard, there's a reference to...*

Denys Arcand: Yeah, but that's a suburb. It's anchored here. It's not a false film in that sense. These are people who are deeply rooted here, but I tried to very specifically, very consciously in my writing of it, to eliminate all references that would demand of a foreign viewer any specific knowledge of the Canadian situation. Apart, of course, from that the fact that we are Canadian and on the borders of the empire, but, as for everything else, there's not a

word. No specific mention of the university or the fact that we speak French within a majority that is English or anything, unless you can think of one.

Cinema Canada: *I can think of one that strikes me as important, the most specific reference, and you keep the camera on it, and it is Michel Brunet's book, Notre Passé présent.*

Denys Arcand: All right, but I'll tell you why I did that...

Cinema Canada: *And there's Monsignor So-and-so... Mgr Bourget...*

Denys Arcand: But those references are entirely understandable, it seems to me. Whether one *knows* which Monsignor it was is not important. Nor is the fact that Brossard is a suburb. If I'd made the film in Paris, I would have said Neuilly or, in New York, the South Bronx.

As for Brunet, that's specific for the only reason that I wanted this unbeliev-

able sado-masochistic rocker to bring a gift to that girl. And I wondered what he would bring her as a gift, something completely unbelievable, a gift that's completely the opposite of him because he's never set foot in a bookstore in his life. So I imagined him going to a bookstore and asking the clerk, 'I've got a friend who's a history prof, what could I give her?' And the clerk would take the first book from the pile, even though the friend's already got 25 annotated copies and already knows the book by heart, but he thinks it'll make her happy to get a gift like that.

Except that Michel Brunet was my professor at the University of Montreal in 1960, and I loved him. He was a very great teacher who was tremendously important to me, and so that book is an insider reference.

So that's my homage to him. It's an inside joke, but I wanted to have his name there since it's a film about historians and history. But for the spectator, it's not important. It's simply a book that the rocker gets for his friend.

Cinema Canada: *What struck me is that here's a guy who's completely antithetical to the intellectuals who are dispersed in their decadence. He's the only 'authentic' one, if you will, and what he brings out is the national memory: our present past.*

Denys Arcand: Okay, but for me it wasn't like that. Originally for me it was to the memory of Michel Brunet, but you're right in a way.

Cinema Canada: *Think of that part of the film where he says to them, 'Remember, you bunch of assholes.' Otherwise, why professors and why specifically history professors, why not filmmakers?*

Denys Arcand: For two or three reasons. The first is, and this is a notion that came to me while I was making *Le Confort et l'indifférence*, and it's a fundamental Canadian reference, a pan-Canadian reference, and that's comfort. What Canadians seek above anything else is comfort. Before everything. You see that on the economic plane: any body who starts up a company, immediately wants to sell it to the Americans here, so that he can get together three million bucks to go and build a villa in Palm Beach or Palm Springs and end his life playing golf. That's the fundamental Canadian sense of comfort.

So I wanted people who were comfortable. That is, people in their 40s – and God knows there are a lot of them in Canada – who are happily installed in comfort and won't budge until they retire. So it could have been functionaries, or people from CBC, or Air Canada; but it's university professors, and for a number of reasons. To make a film about filmmakers bored me – film within film, cinema looking at itself. I think it's like trying to bite your tail. It's looking at yourself too much.

And I also wanted people – and this is due to the fact that we already had a major producer and a French distributor, Christian Fechner from Gaumont – who would make the film succeed in France. So by taking characters from a certain milieu, I was sidestepping the language problem, the *joual* question which is a monstrous problem for us in France because they then sub-title or dub since they can't understand us. So,

for once, and, God, I'm glad of it, after it screened at Cannes, there was no language question. Because these people speak the same language; the accent may be different, but this is a film that is immediately comprehensible in its totality by a French audience. That was important.

I wanted the film to have those elements — comfort and accessibility of language. After that, as I am a historian and all of my films are more or less concerned with history, I'm familiar with that milieu. My brother is a university professor; many of my friends are professors. At the same time in terms of the idea of being on the steps of the empire, that works because historians are used to thinking about such questions, and so they'll speak about them more readily than, say, engineers.

Cinema Canada: For me, there's the aspect of the film that's a powerful accusation very specifically aimed at historians as the bearers of the national memory, if you want. Or I can look at the film that way, as a powerful critique of an extraordinary intellectual failure. These are people who've done their doctorates at Princeton, at Berkeley or San Diego — that is, in the high spheres of international knowledge. In other words, they've been intellectually de-nationalized. Then they're undermined by comfort, which means that, in terms of the empire, they have the status of industrial workers because there is the reference in the film to their having the best labour contract in North America. And your film reflects upon this ethically. For instance, right at the beginning of the film, Remy tells his class that history is not an ethical science. But your view of history is very precisely that it is an ethical science.

Denys Arcand: Why?

Cinema Canada: Because of what your films say about questions of ethics, of how we live. Here are people who are so completely professionalized that there is a split within their professional life between their minds and their bodies. And for me your film is an accusation on exactly that point, or so I take it.

Denys Arcand: For me, it's not an accusation because I have a lot of affection for those characters. Because those characters are also me. That's what I am. So I can only attempt to look at them with lucidity. After all, what can they do? One cannot change history. They are lucid enough to know that history is a kind of blind force that advances like a glacier and, whether you're conscious of it or not, it will continue to advance. And I wanted that kind of lucid character but who's also at the same time rather sad. When the woman says: 'Me, I don't get sabbaticals in Brazil,' Pierre at the other end of the table looks at her and smiles. He knows what she's saying. He's not unconscious.

Cinema Canada: That's why it's an accusation. They know. Pierre says to the student: 'Look, you can't stay forever in secondary school marking papers. You need your doctorate!'

Denys Arcand: But what more can he say? He likes him, the brilliant young student correcting papers. So he says to him: 'You need to get your doctorate,

because then you'll get your *agrégation* and you can make \$50,000 a year like us.' And that scares the kid. He sees all that. He's not sure. So he says: 'All I want is to be happy' and the other just looks at him.

They took advantage of the choices they had. They know it; they're aware of it; but can you blame them for that? You say it's an accusation; I say it's just a look and I don't dare reproach them anything. They didn't get that because their fathers had it... it's not social stratification as in Europe; these are not people who grew up with maids. You can't blame them for not having a developed social consciousness or anything; these are people from popular milieux. But they have the unbelievable advantages procured by Canadian comfort. But then so does the majority of the Canadian citizenry.

Cinema Canada: But the flip-side of that, in addition to the comfort and the pan-Canadian desire to sell out and get out, is that the country suffers. Whether it's at the level of national understanding, if you want, or the comfort complex, the other side is that there's something missing, there's a dimension to national life that just isn't there.

Denys Arcand: That's true.

Cinema Canada: But it's been 20 years that you've thought about the nature of that kind of decline, which is in effect what technocracy is, and it's still the same question that you asked in an interview at the time of *On est au coton*: What do you do with an industry that's in decline, whether it's textiles, or the American empire, whether it's professionalism that cuts you off from a vital relationship to your own thoughts? There's that splendid scene in the film by the lake when Pierre says that he just can't get over the fact that these are people who can develop theories about everything, and yet there they are in massage parlours getting themselves whipped.

You raise the question. I'm not saying that there's an answer but at least there's a consciousness that it is a problem. And once you're dealing with a technological civilization that's global, it's a hell of a big problem.

Denys Arcand: You can't expect a film to give answers to everything. The film is my questionings, and there they are. But there's affection for those characters. They are not people I'm looking at through a glass darkly. It's too close to me.

Cinema Canada: Let's talk about the Canadian or Quebec film industry. It's interesting to re-read the credits of *Réjeanne Padovani* and realize that all those people have been working together now for 20 years. Do you think that the past 20 years of the Quebec film industry have been a decline? How do you see what's going on? When you came back from Cannes, you said, and I took it as sarcasm: 'Let's not change anything, only may it last.'

Denys Arcand: There I was speaking only of the last two years. Because what happened, at least as far as the theatrical feature goes, between the years 1970-75, was a rather remarkable explosion of filmmaking, both in Toronto and

Montreal. This was when the first films were made: mine, those of Gilles Carle, those of Don Shebib in Toronto. And this happened in part because of the first laws in support of cinema which allowed the financing of films via tax shelters.

At first it was marvellous. At least until the day when the lawyers got control, and the schemes began. The tax shelters became absolutely unbelievable and thus did federal policies lead to the abuses that we experienced after 1975 and which, for all practical purposes, killed our national cinema. People began making American B series films. There was that aberrant orientation at the time when the CFDC encouraged films like *Agency*, *Final Assignment*, that kind of thing. And this gave rise to all kinds of abuses that were eventually rectified, but meanwhile the filmmakers were silenced and there were no more films.

That led to a new folly which was when the CFDC changed its name to Telefilm and henceforth we would only make TV series. The orientation was changed in the belief that salvation would come from television. They've more or less abandoned that policy now in the past year-and-a-half, two years. For the moment, in the past two years, there haven't been any policies and that's fabulous...

Cinema Canada: There's never been any policy...

Denys Arcand: Perhaps, but in the meantime that's what passed for policy. The president of Telefilm Canada and the people who followed took these absolutely aberrant positions. As a result, there were administrative changes and the end-result was that these so-called policies came to halt. And as soon as that happened, our cinema revived.

It was no accident that this year at Cannes, and it was my first time back there in 12 years, I met a guy from Ontario called Leon Marr who'd just made his first film, and he was there too. What I'm saying is that is only possible when there is no policy, when the bureaucrats no longer have it in their heads to attempt to define what the policy henceforth will be.

As a result, we're witnessing the rebirth of authentic films by filmmakers, *auteur* films.

If you take Montreal, the two films that have had the longest runs in theatres this year are *Anne Trister* and *Pouvoir intime*. It's unbelievable. We haven't seen that since '74. *Anne Trister*'s been out since February and it's still playing. Well, that's the way it should be.

In that respect, it's not a decline at all, it's a renaissance. Gilles Carle is bringing out a new film, a very personal film in September. There are three of four features made last year that'll be coming out: Arthur Lamothe did a feature; François Labonté has made a feature that's due for release. There are a whole bunch of films forthcoming. Léa (Pool) is making another film. All that seems exceptional. Until the day when somebody's going to decide on a new policy and all the emphasis will be placed on that, and we'll disappear again.

You have to leave the arts to their own rhythm, let them develop, favour them — and here the agency that for me

has almost always been exemplary is the Canada Council. At least in terms of the fine arts. It's that kind of attitude, and every time I've been there, as a jury member, it has always seemed to me that those people had the right philosophy: you did not need any other policy than that of encouraging what comes out of the milieu. No doubt they have other faults but...

Cinema Canada: ... Nevertheless what was required was a milieu outside the institutional structures. You once said that, outside of the Film Board, it was impossible to make a film unless one had the incredible optimism of a Jean Pierre Lefebvre or the commercial instincts of a Denis Héroux.

Denys Arcand: That's right. It's not making the film itself that's impossible. In the present structures, you can make a film. It's especially at the level of the script that it's still a problem, and I'm fighting for that, and I'd like to wage a small battle there.

Le Déclin, for example, was only possible because Roger Frappier was head of production at the Board. He called me in and said: 'Listen, I'm going to give you \$30,000. Go home and write.' That's still not possible at Telefilm nor at the SGC. You can't make a film until you have a script. But what they want first of all is a ready-made script. But when you're working at a job, unless you're fired by some kind of amazing zeal and can write at night after having done something else all day, or if you're a journalist and you've got some script project you've been working on forever. But if you're a professional filmmaker, you're going to do what I do: make TV series or commercials. And then you're too tired to write a script.

This one took me 10 months of constant work, from morning to night. I had four versions that I rewrote completely four times. It was an enormous job, and I don't need piles of money; just enough to pay the rent and put gas in the car. So the big problem of structures like Telefilm or even with private producers is not to be able to say: 'Here's a cheque, go.' And that, I think, is the missing link. Because once the script is properly done, it's simple to produce a film. I had no problem with this one.

Cinema Canada: A number of years ago, you said that 'The virtuosity of our cameramen, our editors and our soundmen only mask the slenderness of the thinking in Québécois film.' What is this problem with thinking or writing?

Denys Arcand: There are two things here. For one, we're all children of the documentary. That's how Canada got started in cinema.

Cinema Canada: But in the beginning they were all scripted — at least on the English side, it was very script-heavy. Don Brittain once said that for nothing little documentaries, you'd have to write a book.

Denys Arcand: That was the very beginning, and those weren't the good ones. After that you had the *Candid Eye* and they weren't scripted. The English did like we did; it was the same approach. Low, Kroitor, Wolf Koenig, Allan King, they all did that: these were guys who made documentaries with their cameras on their shoulders. Think

of *Corral* in the west. It was the same thing here when they went to l'Île-aux-Coudres, to l'Île-aux-Grues, etc. The first priority was to have images of ourselves: Who are we? What do we look like? Except after you've done that for 15 years, from 1955-70, you've gained an image, you've got thousands of reportages on what we are. After that, what do you say? There's that other cinematographic aspect which is expression, the expression of oneself that is thinking, reflection...

Cinema Canada: *One could say that cinema in Canada is fundamentally technocratic, and bureaucratic. You yourself once said, sarcastically perhaps, that you were a technocrat and conscious of the limitations of it. You also said at another point that when you made a film in the private sector you could not allow yourself to do anything other than a normal exercise in filling a theatre. So it comes back to the same question: to what degree have all the established structures been a tremendous burden on creativity?*

Denys Arcand: They've certainly weighed very heavily, but Canada is too small a country for it to be otherwise. And one can't expect, in the case of Quebec and probably for Canada too because of the American presence which is so invasive, one cannot hope to develop a purely commercial cinematography; that is, one that would be directly profitable. The TV networks don't pay enough for documentaries and the theatres don't bring in enough money for there to be such a thing as purely private producers. So sooner or later, the State has to help. If the State is paying, it's bureaucrats who are going to direct the payments, and so make the decisions. And, I think, in the case of Canada, it will always be this way. And not only in cinema. It's the same in theatre or in literature. It's the same for publishing houses, or in painting. The State looks after everything.

Now if the State looks after everything, the battles you have to fight are either with or against functionaries. We are at the mercy of different administrations, some of which are very supportive. Sometimes it happens that you get a brilliant appointment and there's a flourishing. Then the State changes, either it's the government itself, or the minister or the senior administrators and you're at their mercy again. That's why it's so fragile.

When I say that nothing should be changed it's because for two years now, things seem to be working very well because they're not trying to impose a policy. All they're doing is administering the budgets and we'll do the rest. It's working. Don't touch a thing!

But I know perfectly it won't stay this way. Someone will get a brilliant idea and will go see the Minister and the Minister will say, 'Okay, let's do it.' And we'll be in shit for another four or five years. And that's how it is in Canada, or almost always.

Cinema Canada: *Always contingencies and accidents. Was *Le Déclin* also an accident since *Frappier* did not last long at the Board? Do you feel it was an accident, that a little miracle happened?*

Denys Arcand: Yes. *Frappier* left the

NFB. He couldn't stand being in bureaucratic meetings five days a week from 9 to 5. That's what it means to be a federal functionary; it's going to meetings.

That said, it's not necessarily worse than being at the mercy of Coca-Cola or whatever company controls Columbia, MGM or Fox. Cinema is always absurd, and there are monstrous constraints because it costs so much. And in the context of Los Angeles, your problems are going to be even worse than ours, in a way. In Hollywood, people can go 10 years without making a film because they didn't succeed in getting the project together or because they have to do a thousand other things meanwhile to get by. Either way, you've got a context that you have to live with. You can only hope that if you win a prize, as I did, you get a chance to speak to the bureaucrats and they'll listen to what you have to say because they remember your name... For instance, Peter Pearson, whom I hadn't seen since 1974 in Winnipeg when he was still a filmmaker...

Cinema Canada: *At the time of the *Winnipeg Manifesto*?*

Denys Arcand: That was the last time I'd seen him. So I saw him at Cannes and he said: 'Listen, come and have lunch with me, I'd like you to tell me how you see things.' Well, that helps. You try to do the best you can. Effectively, the climate is favourable, and I think that's fine.

Cinema Canada: *You said once that it was possible to conceive of the destiny of Québécois film, no longer as a cinema of failure but as one of conquest when culture and daily life would finally meet. But you also said that Quebec cinema, like Quebec literature, like Quebec painting, was plunged in an unhappy mediocrity whose sign was an eternal optimism that things would get better, that it was coming. So: Is it coming? Do you feel that it's beginning to take with the public, that the link between culture and daily life is being forged?*

Denys Arcand: It's difficult to say. The only thing I can say is that I have the impression that something important has occurred since 1980, since Gilles Carle's first *Plouffe* film of 1980. Since then, each year, one of our films has been an enormous popular success in Quebec. *Les Plouffe* was an enormous success: it played for six months. The year after *Bonheur d'occasion* held from September to Christmas, all over. Jean Beaudin's two films, *Mario* and *Le Matou* were both important successes - 800,000-1 million spectators, out of a small population like ours, that's starting to add up. It would appear that there's a popular base here.

There was a time when Quebec cinema was synonymous with shit - bad, dull, poorly made. Nobody says that anymore. There's a kind of love from the public that comes to see the films and gets pleasure from seeing them. Certainly that's something new. We didn't get that in the '70s. In 1970 we might have gotten critical successes abroad, but we got nothing like that here. We'd last a month at best and only hard-bitten filmgoers would come to see the films. And that, to a certain degree, I find very important. There have

been things here that have worked very, very well. Even more commercial things, like the *Empire* series, worked enormously well. I remember everyone was very worried because the last two episodes were running up against a gigantic American series, *Winds of War*, and everybody was in a panic; fearing that our last episode would be wiped out. Well, no, we won. More people watched *Empire* than they did the big American series. That's significant.

Cinema Canada: *For you is cinema more a question of filling a theatre or is it still that consciousness that attempts to show people how they are being exploited, like *On est au coton* was or *Le Confort et l'indifférence*?*

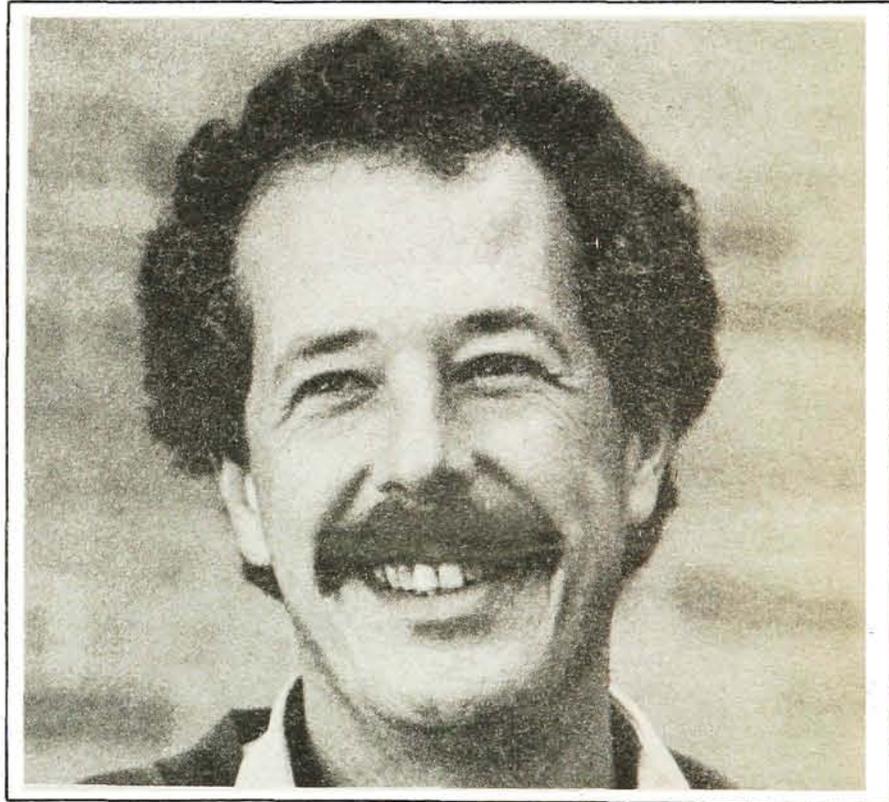
Denys Arcand: I've never renounced any of that in any way. But it is well, nonetheless, to try to be able to do that while filling a theatre. And there is simply the fact that because I'm older, I'm technically better. This film is thus better than my other films. That's a question of writing skills, of directing, of actors that are better, that are fantastic - the envelope which you're presenting to the public is more seductive. But my aim is the same.

I haven't changed and this is an extremely personal film. No one told me, do this or do that. I made it myself in a

was to reach 'the little lady' in Edmonton. So I told myself that that was what I'd do; that was why I was hired. My work thus became solely technical: how does one shoot to get that effect? How does one put emotion in something that doesn't particularly preoccupy me? What does one need here? Will an extreme close-up do it? All those questions are technical. When one hears of the efficiency of American cinema, that's what it means.

Cinema Canada: *It shows in *Le Déclin* from that first incredible travelling shot that here's someone in complete control of what he's doing.*

Denys Arcand: It was the first time I was making a film where I felt it was I who was in control, and not the film controlling me. Before, I'd arrive on location and I'd say to myself: 'Oh, shit, what do we do now?' This wasn't like that. Here it was: let's pick the spot and we'll handle it like this. For instance, I wanted an open kitchen and I wanted sunshine and I wanted there to be a hot-house and it had to have sun inside. I knew the look I wanted to have. Many other things too. I know actors now; they're more active, and I made them run through their text while they were cooking and following a recipe. You can't really see it but while they're speaking, they actually are making cré-



spirit of absolute liberty. If that results in something more - that is, commercially - so much the better.

Cinema Canada: *But it did require 20 years to get there.*

Denys Arcand: I'm someone who matures very slowly. There are people who are brilliant right from the start, people who have had meteoric careers: François Truffaut, for example, after two films knew everything there was to know about directing. But what encourages me is that there are people in film who've done their best work after they were 50. It's taken me a long time to learn to direct, many attempts, much trial and error.

In that sense, the three episodes I did for *Empire* had a determining influence. There I had a producer whose aim

was to reach 'the little lady' in Edmonton. So I told myself that that was what I'd do; that was why I was hired. My work thus became solely technical: how does one shoot to get that effect? How does one put emotion in something that doesn't particularly preoccupy me? What does one need here? Will an extreme close-up do it? All those questions are technical. When one hears of the efficiency of American cinema, that's what it means.

Cinema Canada: *You said once that Canada was an unliveable country that lived from its contradictions. Do you feel that out of all our contradictions, we're beginning to manage to make do?*

Denys Arcand: We make do and we end up attached to that. Ultimately it's a question of age. It's normal when you're

Denys Arcand's

Le Déclin de l'empire américain

Like the old problem of whether the glass is half-full or half-empty, contemporary life resonates with such impossible questions as: Is the world right-side up or topsy-turvy? Do things get better or worse? Is ours a time of progress or one of decline? "How can we know?" wonders the philosopher-king of Canadian cinema in the deservedly much ballyhooed *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*.

Though don't be fooled by the film's title which is surely one of the masterstrokes of advertising copy in the history of the American century. Arcand doesn't know either. But for the sake of argument he takes the decline thesis which has been available for almost as long as humankind has thought about the meaning of history, and sees how far he can run with it. By all indications, pretty far.

Then again Canadians have long looked at the United States from a general theory of decline based on the premise that the pursuit of individual happiness, that cardinal American value, is socially destructive. For the claims of radical individualism offend something in the Canadian sense of the orderly collective.

And Arcand is quintessentially Canadian in his cinematic ethic, in that he always frames his films in the collective. Here, it's empire and within that, the class of intellectuals. Or, rather, that portion of the ideological apparatus whose profession is (the) entertainment (of the collective memory).

However, among the individual intellectuals portrayed here, there's little awareness of the collective memory, other than its reduction to professionalism ("Numbers, numbers,

numbers," Rémy lectures early on in the film), tempered with the resentful knowledge that none of them will ever amount to "a Fernand Braudel or a Toynbee." Moral relativists to a man, the film's intellectuals comprise: Rémy (Rémy Girard), a married bed-hopping hetero; Pierre (Pierre Curzi), a resigned Stoic; Claude (Yves Jacques), a gay male terrified he's contracted AIDS; and Alain (Daniel Brière), a graduate student, listening to and learning from his professional role models as they discuss their relations with diverse women (or in Claude's case, men and boys) while preparing a sumptuous repast at their cottages by Lake Memphremagog in the Eastern Townships. There's one other intellectual and she's the hero of the film: the brilliant, cynical, world-weary Dominique (Dominique Michel).

Then there are the women: the naive neurotic Louise (Dorothée Berryman); the sado-masochist Diane (Louise Portal), and the millennial masseuse Danielle (Geneviève Rioux). In a different sense than for Dominique or the men, the women are in a more dependant relationship to the ideological apparatus: Louise is married to Rémy; Diane is just a *chargé de cours* without tenure; and Danielle, if a graduate student in her own right has the career advantage of living with Pierre. Secondly, except for Dominique whose intellectual and sexual ironizing sets her apart from the others, the women are machines. Just to make that perfectly clear, Arcand shoots them working not terribly hard at bodybuilding, but all the same as mechanical appendages to apparatuses. But even more so, they are mechanized by bodily drives: nerves in the case of Louise; sex for the others, and this from Diane's love of the victim posture, her confession that she is prepared to abase herself extensively for a man, or Danielle's prostitution.

But what brings all these 'types' to life — and here, with his actors, Arcand really outdoes himself in the direction of a film which is already completely deliberate in its self-control — are the individual characteriza-

tions: Rémy's panic love of life; Pierre's resignation; Yves' tragic sense of the impossibility of beauty in a corrupt world; Louise's agonizing sobbing in an extraordinary sequence of pure existential pain; Diane's seduction by "the power of the victim;" only Danielle seems not to have much of a personality. Then, of course, there's Dominique, the most lucid of them all, who even as she takes the men to bed one by one, never stops for a second seeing how farcical it all is.

But even she is limited in her lucidity and hurts Louise without knowing it. In other words, each of the character's individualities annuls or inflects the validity of their general perceptions; if these people are at all meant to be real, could they be any other than how they are? Is this, then, decline, or just what people are (and so, presumably, what they've always been and always will be)?

A form of answer appears in the character of Mario (Gabriel Arcand), the Arcandian version of Rousseauist man; that is, uncontaminated by civilization's discontents, except for the use of assorted chemicals, mascara and leather. "You intellectuals only talk about sex," he says, grabbing Diane's hair, "but when she gets me hard, I fuck her. It's as simple as that." Yet he's just talking, too.

Is *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*, in fact, either about decline or sex, two of the principal factors in the film's success? Instead, I'd say it's rather more about the torments of memory — in other words, that the nihilism of contemporary existence stems from the inability of the past to in any way actively influence the present. Thus Mario's impossible gift to the victimized Diane of Michel Brunet's *Notre Passé Présent* may be a thoughtful gesture — in that Brunet was one of Quebec's most nationalist modern historians. But if in a meaningless present, the past is equally meaningless, it's a gesture only. And all that is left is to suffer from reminiscences, which is what Freud termed hysteria. Thus all of nationalist modern historians. But if, in a meaningless present, the past is

equally meaningless, it's a gesture only. And all that is left is to suffer from reminiscences, which is what Freud termed hysteria. Thus all of the characters are, each in his/her own way, hysterical — entrapped in an absurd present between an impossible past or an equally impossible future, be it Rémy's one real affair at a California colloquium; Louise's marriage; Pierre awaiting death stoically; Danielle's year 1000; beauty for Yves; humiliation for Diane; Alain's fear he'll become just like them; or Dominique's comforting intellectual fiction that there is decline.

But Arcand's Nihilism balks before one final fiction. It's a Fantasy of Canadian nationalism that, after so many years of being part of somebody else's empire, that empire's decline would not fatally entail ours — and our day could still come. In the margins, we dream, as they fantasize in the film, that we can stand idly by, watching the U.S. go up in a spectacular armageddon. (Look, for example, at the panic produced in Canada by the merest hint of protectionist legislation in the U.S. Congress just to see how false a supposition that is. Or, even better, that it's the Americans who've liked the idea of *The Decline of the American Empire* so much that they're going to remake it, Hollywood style.) De-luded prisoners of the margins we are, but lovable, like the characters of the film.

And yet, all of a sudden, being Canadian no longer seems to mean always feeling sorry but feeling as marginal as everybody else in a time, as McLuhan prophesied, when there are no centers, only margins — and, lo and behold, *Le Déclin*'s an international hit, the old Canadian film dream of the universal statement come true at last. Besides, now that decline is chic, everything declines further, even decline itself.

So much so that Canadian film has never looked better — with Arcand commanding pride of place. If this is decline, then, to paraphrase the Beat poet Richard Farina, Canadian cinema's been down so long, it sure looks like up to me.

Michael Dorland •

• Le Déclin's meeting of the sexes



LE DÉCLIN DE L'EMPIRE

AMERICAIN d./sc. Denys Arcand a.d. Jacques Benoit 2nd a.d. Monique Maranda cont. Johanne Prigent d.o.p. Guy Dufaux asst.cam. Nathalie Moltavko-Visotzky 2nd asst.cam. Sylvaine Dufaux stills Bertrand Carrière elect. Roger Martin, chief. Normand Viau, Claude Fortier key grip Yvon Boudrias grip Jean-Pierre Lamarche art.d. Gaudeline Sauriol cost. Denis Sperdouklis ward. Mario Davignon ext.props. Alain Singher set props Charles Bernier make-up Micheline Trepanier hair Gaetan Noiseux loc. scout. Huguette Bergeron sd.rec. Richard Besse boom Yves Benoit rec. Jean-Pierre Joutel ed. Monique Fortier asst.ed. Diane Boucher sd.ed. Paul Dion p. René Malo (Corporation Image M&M Ltée); Roger Frappier (Office National du Film du Canada) line p. Pierre Gendron p.man. Lyse Lafontaine unit admin. Monique Létourneau p.coord. Jean Gérin p.acct. Micheline Bonin unit man. Estelle Lemieux p.c. Corporation Image M&M Ltée, L'Office National du Film du Canada with the assistance of Telefilm Canada Société Générale du Cinéma du Québec and Société Radio-Canada Colour. 35 mm running time: 95 mins. l.p. Dominique Michel, Dorothée Berryman, Louise Portal, Geneviève Rioux, Pierre Curzi, Rémy Girard, Yves Jacques, Daniel Brière, Gabriel Arcand

25 to say that the contradictions are unliveable. But you end up, finally, saying what I've been saying. You have to have met a Hollywood director who has to answer to Kennair Productions to know that between Kennair and Telefilm - I won't say I prefer Telefilm Canada - but you can manage. Sure, there are moments when you can't stand it anymore, you won't stand for their latest policy, and other times I tell myself, 'Shit, it's not that bad.' So maybe, in a way, I'm more tolerant. That's age, maybe.

Cinema Canada: *In Le Déclin, there's that part in the text that says that the single, most important civilizational change since industrialism, since the coming of cinema, has been that women today live longer. There's a sense in the film that you've begun to think of feminism as something really quite profound.*

Denys Arcand: It's something we're all living through. One of the fundamental notions of the film's *mise en scène* is that it's the men who are in the kitchen cooking while the women are out bodybuilding. That's not at all a theoretical notion; it's often happened to me in the last four or five years when I go to eat at friends' houses and find myself in the kitchen with my buddies, exchanging the addresses of specialty-food shops while the women are in the living-room, talking about their jobs and getting new contracts.

The film crews have changed. On my crew, the first assistant cameraman, the assistant-editor, the two assistant cameramen, camerawomen rather; there were women everywhere. So it's

all very different; you've got soundwomen, the booms are women; the crews are about 60-40. And when you've got 40 per cent women on a crew, the tone changes and it changes the film and that's a reflection of the actual reality.

Cinema Canada: *But there's also that mocking line that associates decline with women coming to power.*

Denys Arcand: It's nothing more than that. But it's a fact that effectively, juridically, historically, the only other moment when women have had a comparable juridical power than at present was during the decline of Rome in the first century B.C. when the patrician Roman women were citizens on a basis of absolute equality with the men. So I remembered having read that, and one of the characters takes the occasion to say that it's obviously a sign of decline. But it's nothing more than that.

Cinema Canada: *There's a moment in the film where Dominique Michel says that nothing exasperates her more than unconsciousness, but she says that precisely at a moment of unconsciousness since she's not aware that Dorothee Berryman is listening. The relationship between consciousness and unconsciousness seems to preoccupy you a lot.*

Denys Arcand: It's me that's speaking, it's not Dominique. And I'm speaking throughout that film!

Cinema Canada: *You're often referred to as cynical or ironical. When you made La Maudite Galette, you said you no longer had any ideas, only vi-*

sions of nightmares.

Denys Arcand: That was then.

Cinema Canada: *But is that cynicism in the Greek philosophical sense, as a political strategy, as opposed to cynicism in its popular sense?*

Denys Arcand: It's not cynicism in its popular sense, if one has to use the term 'cynical'. It's in the philosophical sense and it's also in the sense of an extraordinary love of lucidity. I can't bear people who don't want to see what appears to me to be reality. I don't know why; I've always been that way. And it's often gotten me into embarrassing extremes, but I don't know why. It seems to me that the first attribute of humanity is intelligence. And that's what distinguishes people from animals; it's as simple as that. That's why I make films, for those who cannot see what is there: to say to them, 'Look, I'm showing you what is.' And if I'm trying to make them see that, that's why. You can see it or see something else, that's okay, then we can talk; you can say, 'No, it's not that, I see it differently.' But someone who does not see, that is, the woman who lives with her husband who's been unfaithful to her for 20 years, when the entire city of Montreal knows about it, the street knows about it, but she doesn't see it, it's because at bottom she does see it, she's always seen it, but she won't admit it to herself.

Cinema Canada: *You you also say in the film that lying is what bold marriages together and is the cement of all social relations.*

Denys Arcand: Precisely, but you can

always have polite lies that do not prevent you from being lucid. The one who isn't lucid, that's the one to whom tragedy happens. Those are the people hit by tragedy. As for the others, tragedy will not strike them; unhappiness will or illness.

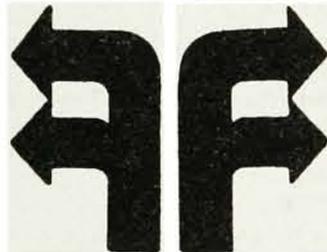
Cinema Canada: *But doesn't that lucidity also have its tragic side - to be surrounded by people, by a world, that doesn't see? Isn't that tragic?*

Denys Arcand: Yes, possibly. Maybe that's why I make films, I don't know. But, in fact, that's widespread. Often people do know, only they don't say it and maybe that's why I have this reputation as a cynic. Yet if you look at my relations with those characters, it's not sarcastic; it's very warm and the camera was warm too, close to them. Those aren't insects I'm looking at, not at all; they're my friends, they're me.

Cinema Canada: *One last quote. You were unemployed at the time and thinking about a lot of things. "I realized," you wrote, "that only in a few years I too would have a house in Outremont, or in NDG, two kids, my Volvo, my country house, my job at the Board, my yearly trip to Cannes. And I would have nothing left to say but give interviews on CBC."*

Denys Arcand: A statement that, in the end, I recreated with this film, or part of it. The context was that those were the reasons why I left the Board and turned freelance. And that's a decision I've never regretted.

(Translated by Michael Dorland...)



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