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 sounds with such impossible questions as: Is the world right-side up or upside down? Is ours a time of progress or much ballyhooed Decline? Arcand doesn’t know either. But for masterstrokes of advertising copy in the history of the American cinema, is socially destructive. For him, the premise that the pursuit of happiness, that cardinal 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 care much about 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 far she has come.

But even she is limited in her lucidity and hurts Louise without knowing it. In other words, each of the characters' individualities annihilates or reflects 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 that 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 sado-masochist naive neurotic Louise (Dorothée Berryman), the sedum-asocial Danielle (Geneviève Rioux). In a different sense than for Louise, sex for the others, and this correction of a film which is already Micheal Brunet's Notre Passe Présent may be a thoughtful gesture - in that Brunet was one of Quebec's most nationalist filmmakers. 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.

And Arcand's Nilism baulks before his 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 is chic, everything declines as Mc Luhan prophesied, when there was no future.

By all indications, pretty far. "Numbers, we can. We can. We can.

So much so that Canadian film has had a thought, 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 it is that if 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.)

But that's not the point.