

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 resounds 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