

## Vancouver International Film Festival—Part 4

## Groping their way toward power and wealth

David Walsh  
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*"History is the greatest of dialecticians."* - G. Plekhanov

Denys Arcand (born 1941) is a prominent Canadian film director. He began making documentaries in the 1960s, and then fiction films in the 1970s, revealing a sensitivity to the corruption of Quebec politics and the exploitation of workers, particularly in the textile industry (*Québec: Duplessis and After; Cotton Mill, Treadmill* [which was banned by Canada's National Film Board, for whom Arcand worked, at the time of the October Crisis in 1970]; *Réjeanne Padovani*). In other words, like everyone else in Quebec cinema at the time, Arcand was considered a leftist.

Arcand also had a strong Catholic background; his mother had wanted to be a nun and he spent nine years in Jesuit school, apparently aspiring to the priesthood himself for a time. Arcand's first feature, *Dirty Money* (1972) [a better translation would be *Damned Money*], a black comedy of a kind, treats money and its power to corrupt ordinary people. Extreme violence, at times gratuitous, is a recurring motif in his early films. The central episode in *Gina* (1975) is a gang-rape, whose victim, a stripper, exacts revenge by supervising the brutal killing of every one of her attackers.

One is reminded of the work of another Catholic-influenced director, Martin Scorsese, and his often horrified, uncomprehending responses to contemporary society and its contradictions, which tend to glamorize violence as much as they criticize it. These are individuals who react to "evil," not by probing its social roots, but by falling back on their religious training and blaming the "rotteness" of human nature.

The Quebecois filmmaker attained a certain international prominence with *The Decline of the American Empire* in 1986 and *Jesus of Montreal* in 1989. At a time of rapidly deteriorating standards in North American filmmaking, Arcand's works at least suggested the possibility of intelligence in cinema. *Stardom* (2000), however, was a flat and unmemorable look at the problem of celebrity.

*The Barbarian Invasions*, his newest film, is a follow-up of a sort to *The Decline of the American Empire*, in which a group of Quebec quasi-intellectuals sat around and discussed sexuality, fidelity and related questions. (While the proceedings in *Decline* were amusing and vaguely iconoclastic, they too proved eminently forgettable.) A central figure in the earlier film, Rémy, a supposedly leftist history professor, is now dying of cancer. His son, Sébastien, a successful international financial trader living in London, returns home and uses his unlimited cash to obtain the proper medical treatment for his father. He bribes or bullies hospital officials and local union bureaucrats into opening an abandoned floor of the hospital.

With the aid of a family friend's daughter, Nathalie, an addict, he also organizes a supply of heroin to relieve Rémy's pain. Moreover, Sébastien manages to collect his father's far-flung friends and ex-mistresses, so that the older man dies with those closest to him nearby. In one of the film's nastiest twists, he even pays a few of Rémy's former college students to visit their former teacher in the hospital and express their appreciation for

his sagacious influence on their lives. In reality, they hardly noticed his departure from the classroom.

On one level, *Barbarian Invasions* concerns the reconciliation of father, a disillusioned "sensual socialist," and his strait-laced "capitalist" son. Presumably, Sébastien has become what he is in part as a response to his father's libertinage. It is not precisely clear, however, on what basis the reconciliation is effected. Sébastien doles out cash, his father complains, they bicker and eventually embrace. It's simply a reconciliation of convenience. Neither draws any particularly meaningful conclusions about his life or outlook, nor do we.

Rémy's profound cynicism is the focal point of the film. We are apparently meant to delight in it as much as the filmmaker does. In one of the film's most distasteful scenes, Rémy tells a horrified Catholic nurse that while recent history has been bloody, it does not compare to the century following the European discovery of the New World when 250 million indigenous people died in Latin America and North America. "The history of mankind," he tells her gleefully, "is a history of horrors." Later, he asserts that "Intelligence has disappeared" and mankind has descended into another Dark Age.

The "barbarians" are now invading (i.e., like the post-Roman Empire Vandals and Goths), although it is not entirely clear whether this refers primarily to the Islamic fundamentalist forces apparently responsible for the World Trade Center bombings—an event introduced in a thoroughly arbitrary and unexplained fashion in the film—or American-style financial wheelers and dealers, or both.

Whether or not Arcand shares Rémy's thoroughly demoralized view of humanity is almost beside the point. He places the words in the mouth of the character intended to be the film's most sympathetic, who has the upper hand, verbally and ideologically, over nearly everyone else. These are the phrases one remembers.

The director, however, would like to have his cake and eat it too. We are presented, on the one hand, with the impractical, womanizing Rémy who refuses to travel to an American hospital on nationalist grounds and because he voted for a government-run health care system and therefore will "take the consequences." Again, this is intended in its own way to be an endearing characterization. On the other hand, we witness the beneficent power of money, as it dissolves—in Sébastien's hands—all obstacles in its path. Arcand told an interviewer from *CineMovies* that his decision to make Rémy's son a financial trader was simply "a dramatic engine. I'm not making any apology for [the power of] money."

This is disingenuous. What other possible conclusion could a spectator reach than that the film is an apology, in one fashion or another, for "money," or perhaps more accurately a deliberate act of resignation in the face of the latter's presumably unlimited power? Arcand's "damned money" has now nearly traveled full circle.

The film is deeply eclectic and confused, the characters largely unreal and caricatured. Arcand has the unfortunate inclination to be paradoxical rather than penetrating. (And he is not nearly as amusing as he imagines

himself to be.) He is also probably not clear himself as to what he thinks. The filmmaker divides the world along the lines of two opposed principles—the nationally based (and now beleaguered) welfare state and the globalized financial market—and their respective defenders, and then sets about toying with and exploring them as though they exhausted the possibilities of modern social life. These two “opposed principles,” however, are merely forms taken by capitalist economic and social life at different stages in its evolution in the 20th century; a third possibility, the rejection of all forms of class oppression, also exists.

In fact, Arcand manages to draw out and idealize the “worst of both worlds”: from the radicalism of the 1960s, not its social consciousness or spirit of protest, but its bohemianism and egotism; from the integrated world economy, not the liberating potential of overcoming all national and provincial boundaries, but its cult of money and profit.

Arcand may imagine that he treats the “pros and cons” of the situation with an even hand, but the care and intensity with which an artist constructs one image as opposed to another tends to reveal his or her overriding concerns, which may not be articulated at the level of conscious social observation.

The opening shot conducts us through the corridors of Rémy’s hospital. The facility is a terrifying catastrophe, with patients lying on gurneys in the hallways amidst the disorder of construction work. The doctors and interns appear exhausted and demoralized. This is the ‘nationalized’ health care system at work. Hospital officials are double-talking bureaucrats, and the establishment is actually run by the all-powerful unions. The latter notion is a petty bourgeois fantasy. The attack on the unions here is not from the left, for their craven capitulation to the underfunding and the waves of budget cuts that have gutted the public health care system in Quebec, but from the right. The union officials here, one suspects, fulfill Arcand’s vision of the working class: greedy, brutish, ignorant.

The denouement of the film takes place in a pleasant cabin on the shores of Lake Champlain, where Rémy awaits death in the company of his friends, former lovers and his son. Any unclarity about the film’s principal theme disappears. Those assembled ridicule their youthful beliefs in various “isms,” including Maoism, Trotskyism, Quebec separatism, existentialism and structuralism. All that has failed. Rémy recounts a defining moment in his process of disillusionment, when he heaped praise on the Cultural Revolution to a woman visitor from China. As it turned out, her family had been destroyed by Mao’s bureaucratic maneuver. “There was no greater cretinism than that,” he observes.

Social life and its reflection in art possess a certain logic. This scene in *Barbarian Invasions* inevitably brings to mind the conclusion of Marco Tullio Giordana’s *Best of Youth* (2003), a six-hour mini-series made for Italian television, which dramatizes the last 40 years of Italian history through the fate of one family. Giordana’s work and Arcand’s are very different in overall tone and content. However, *Best of Youth* concludes as well with a gathering together of family and friends in a comfortable country house—this time in the Tuscan hills. Here too one feels that the characters have finally overcome the follies of their youth, including their “radical” follies.

One is in the presence in both cases (and others) of a generation of former leftists or radicals that has “seen the light”—gladly, bitterly or otherwise—and has essentially made peace with the establishment. These were people who opposed the most malignant features of capitalist society at an earlier day, but never based themselves on a socialist opposition to the status quo and always shared a skepticism about the revolutionary capacities of the working class. In reality, they oriented themselves, in one way or another, to the various labor and social-democratic bureaucracies, or in the case of Quebec, more directly to the newly emerging welfare state and subsidized culture industry.

Now, all that is in the process of being shattered and such people find

themselves without a home. Not for long. As Marxists have noted, this social layer of former radicals has undergone a definite social transformation. Many came from privileged backgrounds, and they find themselves drawn back to their old milieu. In any event, their way of life and their incomes bind them far more closely to the wealthier portion of the population, with whom they inevitably feel far more “at ease.” (One only has to compare the nightmarish scenes in the hospital with the scenes of Sébastien’s home life or the sequences at the cabin on the lakeshore.) They feel increasingly hostile toward and threatened by the “great unwashed.”

And it must be noted on the historical record that those areas in which the radicalization reached its greatest heights, where the working class most clearly demonstrated its revolutionary potential, have experienced the commensurately greatest retreat by the intelligentsia and the greatest decline in intellectual and artistic life, certainly in the cinema. One thinks of France and Italy in Europe and Quebec in North America. The province underwent an enormous radicalization in the period 1967-1975. Tens of thousands of workers engaged in militant struggles, which many viewed not merely as union struggles, but steps on the road toward a social transformation.

During the *La Presse* newspaper strike of 1971, the 1972 Common Front government workers’ strikes and the social revolt provoked by the jailing of its leader, and the partial general strike in 1975 in support of the United Aircraft workers, Quebec workers demonstrated great combativity and the capacity for self-sacrifice. The entire political establishment in Quebec and Canada feared this movement and conspired to derail it. With the aid of demagogic trade union leaders (full of empty talk about “smashing the system”), the different Stalinist and Maoist organizations, and the pseudo-Trotskyists of various stripes, the movement was largely channeled into support or semi-support for the nationalist Parti Québécois and its reactionary project of independence. The political—and cultural—consequences of this deliberate disorientation and betrayal of the masses have been severe and they have not yet been overcome.

Arcand’s film expresses a mood of those overwhelmed, morally decomposing Quebec petty bourgeois who have groped their way, however reluctantly or hesitantly, toward a new orientation based on power and wealth. (The argument that Arcand’s disorientation is a *social* phenomenon and not a personal failing is supported by the younger Quebec director Robert Lepage’s most recent film, also screened in Vancouver, the misanthropic and unappealing *The Far Side of the Moon*, as well as relatively recent—and very weak—works by Michel Brault and Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, veteran Quebec filmmakers.)

The complacency and conformism of *Barbarian Invasions* has to be underscored. Let’s assume that the director or his characters are right, that all the “isms” have failed, including Marxism. Then what is to be done? As Plekhanov noted long ago, the issue is not the *future of socialism* as such, but the *future of the working class*. What are the present conditions for masses of people, including the population of Quebec and the rest of Canada? Arcand is honest and perceptive enough to portray a society in deep, one might even say terminal, social and moral crisis. However, capitalism is the one “ism” for whose abject failure Arcand has no clever riposte.

*Barbarian Invasions* has won plaudits and critical acclaim in Canada and elsewhere. Arcand’s work has been proclaimed the “greatest Canadian film” in history. It was well received at the Cannes festival and various other venues. Of course, the film is not a monolith of reaction. Arcand provides insights, amusing moments, a touch of eroticism, other attractions. One needn’t assume that audiences, who themselves are confused by events, are merely attracted to the genuinely pernicious elements of the film.

Nonetheless, to treat the matter in its most objective-historical terms, Arcand is responding to the needs of the ruling elite both to help justify

the destruction of the welfare state, which is “badly managed” and “inefficient,” and, more significantly, to denigrate and discredit genuinely radical opposition to the existing order. And this latter project, of which the past half-century provided far too many examples, is one of the most reprehensible and unforgivable an artist can undertake.

*Series concluded*



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