

Contradictions and Paradoxes in Denys Arcand's *The Barbarian Invasion*

Aleksandar Sasha Dundjerovic
University of Manchester

Accepted into Canada's prestigious walk of fame in 2004, Denys Arcand is one of Canada's most acclaimed film auteurs. His working career spans over four decades, however his productivity is limited to only nine feature films, many of uneven quality. Moreover, despite high profile critical success, he is essentially an independent film maker with a documentary film background, creating low budget films for art house audiences. It appears that his career trajectory has been awkward with long periods of inactivity and failures, to unprecedented success. For two decades Arcand was a relatively obscure film maker, and with the exception of the controversial documentary *We work in Cotton* (1970), showing the exploitation of Quebec textile workers, he was generally unknown outside Canada. But almost overnight, in 1986, he became internationally recognized with the release of his authored film *The Decline of the American Empire*. In 1989 he received high critical acclaim (including a Golden Reel for the best box office Canadian film) for *The Jesus of Montreal*. Despite these successes his film adaptation of Brad Fraser's play *Unidentified Human Remains and the true Nature of Love*, renamed as *Love and Human Remains* (1993) failed to meet with the critical acclaims of the previous two films. After seven years he returned to another authored project *Stardom* (2000). The film was perceived, by many, as a failure—a mild attempt to satirize celebrity, generally an easy target for irony. Three years later Arcand returned to the storyline from *The Decline* following the protagonist Remy and creating the film which has become his most acclaimed critical success: *The Barbarian Invasion* (2003).

The Decline of the American Empire, *The Jesus of Montreal* and *The Barbarian Invasion*, won international recognition, with Arcand receiving a Film Festival award at Cannes, Cesar and Genie awards, a New York Critics Circle Award, a European film award, nomination for an Oscar for *The Decline* in 1987, and finally an Oscar for the best foreign film in 2004 for *The Barbarian Invasion*. An impressive reception, it is one which is unmatched by any other Canadian filmmaker. Despite this critical acknowledgment, and subsequent US box office success, particularly with *The Barbarian Invasion*, he was not sucked in into the vacuum of Hollywood and the American film industry that dominates

Canadian film producing. His career combined and responded to various influences; from documentary film making following Quebec's cinema direct, to impacts from the French nouveau vogue, Jean-Luc Godard, European art house cinema, as well as American commercial film genres in a wish to break out from small national cinema and reach an international audience.

This paper examines *The Barbarian Invasion* in the context of two previous films: *The Decline* and *The Jesus of Montreal*. They are often referred to by commentators as the Montreal trilogy because of their unified location. However, more pertinent than location is that these films form an allegorical triptych. It is allegorical not only because of the overtly historical and biblical references, but because the milieu of Arcand characters are symbolic of the global state of the human condition—representing a society without beliefs and entirely focused on material values or/and hedonism. I will engage with Arcand's auteurism and dialectics, where the dynamic and constant evolution of meaning comes out of conflict between contradictory oppositions. His form, text and mise-en-scene, montage, image and sound refers to Eisenstein's dramaturgy of film form and dialectical principles, where contradictory meanings are in opposition one to another, in a conflict out of which a new set of meanings arrives. (Eisenstein, 1929)

In the Allegorical triptych, Arcand's storytelling techniques are able to elicit a positive response from an international audience because of his use of emotional narrative and visual counterpoint. Arcand relates very private, local stories to a global audience on an emotional level exploring the universal paradox of human existence—absence and rejection of love, spiritual fulfillment and happiness, temporality of life and the inevitability of death. His dramaturgy of film form uses images that communicate as a language consisting of parallel editing and counterpoints either in shot-spatial conflict within the shot—and in montage-conflict between the shots in montage. It is in *The Barbarian Invasion* that some of the key concerns of Arcand's authorship are fully exemplified: inquiry into the nature of power and the class struggle, dialectical principle and the use of conflict between opposing contradictions: materialism vs. idealism, past and present, memory and factuality and clashes between generations. In his films Arcand is not only provoking viewers but educating, making us question and evaluate our perception of life.

Exposing contradictions

Born in 1941, Arcand spent his youth in the small village of Deschambault, Portneuf County, a farming community of less than 1000 inhabitants, it is

located about 25 km from Quebec City. Raised in a Catholic family, Arcand attended a Jesuit College until his family relocated to Montreal in the mid 1950s. His father was a sailor who disliked film, viewing it as unsophisticated entertainment for the poor, an escape from misery, and a diversion for the lower classes. In contrast to this background, Arcand became a leftist film maker. At the University of Montreal, where he studied history, his thinking was significantly influenced by Marxist philosophy, social criticism and a progressive political activism popular with his generation. Arcand became influenced by the views of the Quebecoise historian Maurice Séguin, placing historical inquiry at the centre of his film work. It was while at university in early 1960s that Arcand started making films. For Arcand (as a historian observing present moment) filmmaking became a medium for self expression—a vehicle through which he could influence people and contribute towards social and political change. He has admitted that his primary purpose in life is to make films—as he points out "Through cinema I justify my existence to myself." (Arcand, 1995, 157).

The relationship he formed with the National Film Board (NFB), a government sponsored organization set up to promote Canadian film making, was crucial in forming Arcand's auteur style. Becoming a film maker in Canada during the late 50's and early 60's was an almost impossible goal to achieve. The only opportunity for young would be a filmmakers was to join the NFB. Arcand, a self educated film maker, never formally trained at film school. His prevailing fascination with cinema began while at university. In 1962 with a group of friends, also students, Arcand made a collective film about their experiences of university life; a docudrama *Seul ou avec d'autres (Alone or with Others)*. It was a very personal work, which focused on a group of first year students experiencing the ups and downs of university life, centering on one day in the life of a female protagonist.

Arcand learned to make films from observing and helping much more experienced filmmakers who were with the NFB, such as Michel Brault, who Arcand credits as the inventor of cinema direct: a form of documentary filmmaking that used lightweight portable cameras and transportable sound recording equipment. (Arcand, 1995, 137). Another of Quebec's most important auteurs, Claud Jutra, also had a significant personal influence on the young Arcand, who learnt from Jutra's depth of knowledge about literature and film history. This was a steep learning curve for Arcand, who unable to engage on personal projects due to his inexperience, responded to what was given to him by the NFB who initially took an interest in him because he was a historian and had a talent for writing scripts on very specific topics. However, Arcand's response

to the given material by NFB, that was playing politically safe game, was marked by his particular way of looking at the world as a conflict between past and present, his auteur approach and dialectics of exposing contradictions and paradoxes of Quebec's society and politics.

It is with his first experience with NFB that Arcand came to understand cinema as a medium that combines historical interpretation with personal perception and observation of present day conditions. In 1964 he directed a script he wrote as an NFB commission, a documentary, *Champlain*, about Samuel de Champlain founder of Quebec City. It was a small project, with a limited budget and was part of an educational series intended to create documentaries about important figures from Canadian history. In the film Arcand makes a controversial point "I suggested that Champlain was attracted to very young girls and, of course, no one wants to be told that the founder of Quebec City was a paedophile." (Arcand, 1995, 138). Arcand's interpretation of Champlain was in conflict with the accepted narrative, exposing contradictions between his national historical significance and sexual intemperance. This juxtaposition of oppositions would be a characteristic that appears in other films, in particularly the allegorical trilogy.

The first time Arcand engaged on a personal project was when he approached the NFB to make a documentary about textile workers. In 1970 he filmed a feature-length documentary *On est au coton* (We work in Cotton) this showed his political activism merging with film through the use of editing. The most 'problematic' element of the film was created by juxtaposing two opposing subjects—editing together the interview with anglophone president Edward King, alongside an interview with French speaking workers. This contradiction exposed the working conditions that disfavoring French Canadians. Pointing to King as an example, the documentary revealed how he had started from the bottom and worked his way up, yet francophone workers who began at the same time remained in a similar position having little chance at promotion. The film caused controversy with official disapproval from the Cotton Industry forcing the Government to pressure the Board and censor the film. This censoring subsequently resulted in the film being banned until 1976.

This censorship only promoted Arcand's reputation and the publicity received gave his fledgling career as a documentary film maker, a great boost. While still working on the *On est au coton* the NFB accepted another of Arcand's personal projects; a documentary that would look at the troublesome Quebec political scene during the Premiers Maurice Duplessis period in office entitled *Québec: Duplessis et après* (Quebec: Duplessis and after..., 1972). Through

parallel editing and conflict between sound and images, Arcand positioned speeches of the generally disliked authoritarian and nationalistic Duplessis, to the popular political instigator of the Quiet Revolution, René Lévesque. Yet again Arcand went against the officially accepted viewpoint suggesting that 'quiet revolution' was superficial and not a radical social and cultural change, displaying his "radical opinion, leftist nationalism and taste for a liberty bordering on anarchy." (Véronneau, 1995, 17) It is in his documentary films that Arcand learned filmmaking forming the basis of his auteur style that he developed into feature films. In his films the logic of Eisenstein's montage of attraction is evident; editing different shots in a structure that enhances conflict and collision, and exposing inherent but concealed contradictions.

Allegorical Triptych—disappearance of community

In allegorical triptych Arcand is progressively charting the breakdown of community, from decline to invasion—showing the emotional alienation of a society whose system of values and beliefs has all but collapsed. The film narrative in *The Decline* follows a group of friends; university professors and intellectuals, contained in a middle class environment (a country cottage) discussing sex and relationships over one weekend. The more time they spend together the more the depth of betrayal, their deceitful sexual games and unstable connections based on self-deception, becomes apparent. Originally Arcand's working title was Scandalous conversations, and being a low budget film (that is traditionally made for a local market) he primarily focused on location and debate. Deliberately choosing sex as the central topic, he wanted the film to be accessible not only to a Quebecois audience but to go elsewhere, outside of the linguistic enclosure. Most Canadian commentators saw this film as a reflection of Quebec society in the 1980's after failed national sovereignty and sexual liberation. Likewise, *The Jesus* is a film also about a group of friends, but now fighting for their ideals—attempting to stage a theatre play and stay true to their vision in a materialistic and product driven society. The group of unemployed actors gather around the central character of Daniel (who plays Jesus) to stage a Passion play for Easter, which is being produced by the Catholic Church.

When a Passion play becomes provocative by being too realistic and confrontational (and therefore political) a struggle ensues against the oppressive structures of power for not glorifying the official interpretation, and so it becomes censored by the Church authorities. It is easy to see how Arcand's own experience with government censorship is reflected in this film. One scene shows an incident during production when security and police are ordered to close

the show and the audience are rioting. Daniel is accidentally injured during the performance and dies. Theatre art as an embodiment of idealism and pure intentions is juxtaposed to a commercial city where business logic defines all interactions. Bart Testa in the essay “Arcand’s double twisted allegory: Jesus of Montreal” points out that “The city of Montreal which surrounds the hero, and which he must traverse on several occasions, is a place where art is travestied, degraded and bruised by commercial culture. In this commercial city there is, effectively, no art, only mass-media products and vulgar celebrity.” (Testa, 195, 90). Daniel calls his collaborators to come out of this commercial ‘vulgarity’, into creating art, personal expression that is expressing something bigger and more selfless. Allegorical use of making authentic theatre; a Christian pageant play, is about salvation with Daniel, like Jesus, sacrificing himself for others.

The Barbarian Invasion follows the same group of friends from *The Decline*, but now they are seventeen years older, and gathered (invited by Sebastian) around the dying Remy from a cancer. Sebastian is using his considerable financial clout buying services to help his father—from a better hospital treatment to assisted suicide. What made this film relevant to an international audience are the two themes that propel film narrative— death of a parent and close friend and unresolved family relations. We follow Remy through the final stages of a terminal illness observed through the central character, Sebastian. The film begins with him receiving a phone call while at work as a broker-investment adviser in his London office. We follow his arrival from the sophistication of London’s commercial district to Montreal’s over crowded hospital, observing his smooth handling of the situation; renting a whole floor for his father’s care from the hospital union representatives, to arranging for euthanasia. Remy’s idealism, hedonism and intellectualism is in conflict with the pragmatic and simplistic Sebastian who has a cash for services approach. By placing money at the centre of all human transactions and making money the key to having power, Arcand is completing what he started in *The Decline*. If this community was in decline in the first film, and losing its spirit in *The Jesus*, by the last one it is dead. The community is disfranchised, unable to connect except through money. Nevertheless, the paradox is evident—in the film money can buy everything but can not divert death, at the end the whole group returns to the cottage first seen in *The Decline* and the cycle of life is complete.

Dominant Perspectives

Three dominant perspectives shape film narrative in Denys Arcand's film authorship. They are historical observation of present day life, political criticism and religion—particularly his relationship with Catholicism. His subjective perspective is directly present in film texts—scripts, which is closer to essay than to a more traditional film scenario. He explores and develops ideas that interest him prior to devising the story, characters and mise-en-scene. As a historian he uses film to examine the past using present day references. The revisionist idea that appealed to a younger generation involved evaluating Quebec history since the XVIII century, extending to contemporary Americanisation and society from a position of English colonisation. The impact of English occupation had left Quebec “isolated on the fringes of the United States, and had forced them to develop survival strategies to validate their existence.” (Véronneau, 1995, 12). Véronneau argues that Arcand took a philosophical position on Quebec's history and mentality, “on the political consciousness of Quebecers” to explore in his films and in particularly documentary films (Véronneau, 1995, 26). Arcand observes that he is “a politically oriented person who is filmmaker, therefore my end product is a politically oriented one. If I wasn't a filmmaker, I would be a political newspaperman or a political plumber”. (Harcourt, 2006, 146).

Indeed, Arcand's films embody the political criticism of Western late capitalist society—exploitative and self obsessed, driven by pure selfishness and a slavery to commodities. Arcand's characters correlate this point of view. Typically, he writes text first, not a story, or a plot line, but observations on life, later assigning characters to the text. As an auteur, he is not concerned with cause-effect and action driven narrative, nor is he working with the actors to develop characters that would organically lead to a story line. Rather, he gives his actors fully written text and situations to which they improvise moment to moment responses and mise-en-scene. Arcand's perspective is present in film, evident through his written text, but also through cinematography—using a combination of long continuous shots and editing of events with opposing (point and counter point) meanings.

In Allegorical triptych, characters are within a group, engaged in a central situation or main activity: dinner and a weekend at a cottage (*Decline*); producing a play (*Jesus*); helping a dying father and a friend (*Barbarians*). It is through interpretation of this central situation—event that Arcand can express his auteur position. It would be accurate to call his films visual speech—a cross between fiction and docudrama organized around one situation—an event that

allows Arcand to relate to spectators using his political, historical and religious perspective.

The main characters in Arcand's films are not successful in the pursuit of their objectives. They are idealists, following a dream regardless of the consequences, immersed in a culture that divides people between achievers and losers based on money and material wealth. They mirror Arcand's own character. His perspective is present through a main character, who voices his own thinking about life as an alter-ego. Coming from documentary film making Arcand has learned how to make his personal perspective dominant. He talks about the world he knows, following artists and university history professors. Having an alter-ego character is a typical device of auteur cinema where the author's life is material for film text—Lepage uses it in *Le Confessionnal* (1995), or Egoyan in *Calendar* (1993). Alter-ego character allows the author to project himself within the matter. Needless to say, Arcand makes a point of making cameo appearances in his films, assigning to himself small roles of somewhat grotesque character, either with power, or on the side of the empowered.

In *The Jesus* the protagonist Daniel, finds self expression and meaning through art by staging a play about Jesus. On the other hand, Remy in *The Decline* and *The Barbarian Invasions* is searching and questioning his beliefs, his scientific mind is trying to find a cause or justify a cause that will make a sense of the paradoxes of life. In *The Barbarian* the parting words of a nurse/nun to Remy as he leaves the hospital to die is “embrace the mystery, embrace the mystery and you will be saved”.(Arcand, 2003) The term mystery relates to something hidden, that is invisible to us and imperceptible, similar to fate. Arcand's perspective on life and death is represented as an acceptance of fate—as a mystery that needs to be embraced. This reflects Arcand's strong religious (Catholic) influences. Both Daniel (for art) and Remy (in his agnosticism and hedonism) are characters with great convictions, willing to stay true to their beliefs, putting their passions before the conventions and the rational of daily living.

Arcand condemns his main characters to death; punished for their beliefs (or absence of it) and passions. Daniel in *The Jesus* dies whilst fulfilling his commitment, and Remy in *The Barbarian* rejects money and God, following his life's agnostic and hedonistic principles until the end. What emerges from these stories is not the confirmation of safe choices but rather a questioning of our rational and humanistic concepts by pointing to the historical—displaying a civilization based on exterminations and genocides. Each century is a

testimony to the slaughter of millions of people. The main characters reflect from loss of personal belief, to absence of belief, particularly when confronted with life forces such as death. Death translates not only to Quebec's inability to survive as a nationalist sovereign francophone structure within a strong Anglophone context, but also to civilization as a whole. North American and indeed the Western world, is scrutinized, showing how individualism has caused fragmentation and the loss of an ideological or religious grand narrative. Materialism and consumerism has triumphed in all its forms and only the trivial but necessary media propaganda offers some reassurance that there is a worthy cause behind politics based on invasions, wars and destructions. Arcand presents a world in which individuals lack altruism and are interested only in personal gain with money as the common denominator.

Dialectics and power struggle

The overarching idea in Arcand's films concentrates on power or disempowerment, revealing the world we live in as increasingly isolated peopled with dejected and unfulfilled individuals that are powerless to achieve their aims. The way in which Arcand represents power is through juxtaposing two sets of meaning that are in conflict. In *The Decline* characters discuss the subject of sex and relationships but their speech is juxtaposed to ordinary activities: a woman working out at the gym, and a man cooking a meal. In *The Jesus* mass media, mass production and business concerns opposes the central character's crusade to find truth and self-expression through art.

Arcand likes to compose visual metaphor as a paradoxical image, framing the environment to accentuate personal conflict. Arriving from his pastoral environment, his view of urban Montreal must have been similar to the view of the commercialized and commodities driven city space in *Jesus of Montreal*. In fact, Arcand's view of the Montreal city sky line is from a pastoral hilltop, with the city juxtaposed to nature. This city serves as a visual backdrop for a play about personal sacrifice for a greater good that will be banned once it threatens the power structure. Rebelling against those with power, questioning official interpretations and using history to pinpoint contemporary paradoxes will come to play a valuable role in Arcand's films.

The film narrative is centered around the hospitalized Remy, as Roberta Imboden observes "a gigantic virtual playground in a life of a dying man" (2005, 49). Indeed, the hospital is the central location—not just a setting for the action but a paradox—a hospital in Canada with free health system that is in conditions of a third world country. We see an over crowded, under resourced hospi-

tal environment, where stealing and neglect of patients goes hand in hand with bribery of officials as a necessary means to achieve anything, where highly regulated union operates as mafia. In *The Barbarian Invasion*, what seems to be the most obvious dialectical opposition—the inefficient government Medical care in Quebec is positioned against effective private but expensive hospitalisation in US. In typical Arcand irony all that lacks function in Canada works seamlessly across the border, in the US. In Burlington, Vermont a scan can be done the following day at a cost of \$2000. Hospitals in the US are represented like 5 stars hotels with services channelled by financial arrangements and contracts.

The opening of the film begins with an image of communion being prepared by a nurse/nun; the host, which we follow through the hospital, is taken to a patient lying on a bed in the hall. The hospital setting provides a defined representation of a metaphoric location, somewhat surreal; closer to nightmare and chaos than a place of care. Doctors do not know their patients, in a depersonalized world with computer generated log books and charts if systems are wrong you have no name, no identity, or rather a new name. The first time we encounter Remy is in a hospital bed, sharing a room with three other patients, when the nurse/nun addresses him she uses the wrong name as the computer lists were incorrect. Pointing to a total irrelevance for human identity temperamental Remy is elaborating his point eloquently when he is suddenly interrupted by what appears to be a sharp pain, the scene ends abruptly. Throughout the film Arcand will repeat this dramaturgical counterpoint—using pain as a device, reminding the viewer about a fixed point in time when Remy will die and ending the scene by leaving it unfinished—with Remy symbolizing mortality as a condition that overrides any other principles. Arcand's temporal perspective is summed up through characters for whom nothing can be as it was, the past is only what is left as selective memory, the present moment is already gone and the future is defined by its past.

Through dialectical principles and pointing to contradictions Arcand emphasizes the main conflict for the viewer. In *The Barbarian Invasion* this conflict is about idealism and socialism vs. capitalism—with Remy representing socialism, and Sebastian, capitalism. The central conflict is shown through an argument between Remy and his ex-wife about Sebastian's arrival. Remy states he has nothing to say to his son, that there is no relationship between them; stating that 'he is one who never read a book'. But his ex-wife points out that his son makes more money in a month than his father does in a year as a university professor. This conflict between son and father and its resolution is the most important element of the narrative, it is the emotional journey—from

indifference to understanding. Open hostility and estrangement slowly moves towards one of care and support and finally to love and selflessness where death brings father and son together. After Sebastian has organized his father's assisted suicide he takes Nathalie, (childhood friend and now a drug addict who was helping Sebastian obtain heroin to ease Remy's pain), to Remy's house. He offers her the house and the opportunity to live there. Whilst alone in the house, Natalie passionately kisses him. When he responds Natalie pushes him away, sending him back to the safety of his protected life. In the closing shot of the film we see Sebastian returning home in the aeroplane, gazing absentmindedly out of the window with a vacant expression we observe his mechanical response to his fiancée's affections and declaration of love.

Barbarians as Outsiders

Historians refer to barbarians in terms of the destruction of the Western Roman Empire by Germanic tribes in the V century. For Romans the word barbarian described someone who babbles, who does not speak the language and is therefore misunderstood. Arcand juxtaposes Barbarians as outsiders to the centre and in opposition to the old world. It is interesting that in recent years this historical moment became a reference in popular culture. For example there is a computer and video game, called *Rome: Total War—Barbarian Invasion*, which contextualises the fight against the barbarians who are massing along the border but are also inside the territory. The pre-text of 'war on terror', lends itself to interpretation as a war against barbarians wanting to take over the Empire. However, the Roman Empire, like contemporary American, was crumbling from inside long before it was destroyed and invaded (if indeed we accept that the American Empire is following in the steps of the Roman Empire). In fact, the interaction in Arcand's film text follows Sebastian's character in a computer—video game way; it is a playground where a set of obstacles are imposed needing to be solved and overcome by a 'hero' (the one playing), before the game can move on. In order for Sebastian—or the one playing, to proceed to another level he has to first clear all the problems set up at the level he is playing on.

Although there are references in the film to Barbarians as outsiders invading 'our land' (immigrants gangs as drug traffickers and Muslim terrorists) ultimately the film is about the collapse of Remy's old world and replacing with a new world order as symbolised by Sebastian's. If we extend the interpretation of barbarian to mean someone who uses a different cultural and behavioural language, then we can view Sebastian as the outsider—bringing a monetary culture and introducing a new 'language' that is not understood by

Remy. Sebastian is constantly bringing the outside into the closed, cloistered world of the hospital through the use of a mobile phone, a VAI0 wireless laptop, and using English to sort out business transactions with international clients. Sebastian is the one who invades the 'land' and takes over Remy's old culture—he is the barbarian. We see Remy's structures collapsing and witness the replacement of the old order by a new one. Arcand also juxtaposed the outside world through editing, bringing into film another media—TV. Reporting the theft of his laptop, Sebastian is greeted by a hospital security officer eating dinner and watching television showing documentary footage of September 11 and a commentary by Quebec historian Alain Lussier. He explains that the historical significance of the Twin Towers was not only that three thousand people died (citing in comparison that at the battle of Gettysburg fifty thousand American died), but that "they struck at the heart of the Empire. In previous conflicts—Korea, Vietnam, The Gulf War, the Empire managed to keep the Barbarians outside its gates, its borders. In that sense people may look back at 9/11, and I stress may, as the beginning of the great barbarian invasion." (Arcand, 2003)

In *Allegorical Triptych*—the American Empire is observed from a Canadian viewpoint; with Canada placed as a deliberately non-specific place, neutral and open for a plurality of cultures to interact. Characters speak French but their way of living and daily *mise-en-scène* is unmistakably Canadian. It is evident, that Arcand was far more accomplished at defining his characters in *The Barbarian* and making them clearly identifiable for a North American audience than he was with *The Decline*. From the beginning of *The Decline* Arcand emphasizes the main point; that this is a society where personal gains are more important than communal, where the individual is above community. These observations made Arcand's film uncomfortable for mainstream US critics. Most of the critical comments Arcand received in the US, rightly or wrongly, point to dislocation and the problematic relationship between the local and global, or rather the abstract approach to defining one's own place in a non-location such as cottage in a countryside, urban space or a hospital. Peter Wilkins observes that "In terms of national culture, Arcand's perspectival ambivalence resists incorporation into the American sphere of cultural influence, simply by not fitting into the categories that sphere sets up. *The Decline* and *Jesus* assert their visibility by refusing consumption. They establish a precarious balance between the local and the placeless, depthless post-modern realm. The 'location on the outskirts of the empire', specifically 'Montreal', persist in the more general subjects of sex and religion." (Wilkins, 1995, 131). However, the location for Arcand is visual counterpoint—conflict in space

between action and its background, in order to foreground the events that need to be emphasized.

Arcand uses history to foreground the present moment. His famous quote “I only know where I came from, not where I am going” points to an importance of past as detrimental to our choices. (1995, 161). In *The Barbarian* he does not fail in reminding us about the fragility and instability of human perception; particularly, how we like to view ourselves and interpret our past. For example, in hospital Remy questions the existence of god and justice in our history by pointing out to the nun/nurse that 200 million Natives have been slaughtered in North America, “just outside this hospital window”. He concludes that “the history of mankind is a history of horrors”. (Arcand, 2003). Arcand rightly exposes the contradiction of an America where Europeans as barbarian come from the outside world and destroyed the native civilization they found. ‘We’ have forgotten the events that make our past unfavourable to our national self image. We are not aware of it since it is not part of the collective consciousness or official history, as Noam Chomsky points out the crime committed by us (West) is not recognized, and therefore did not happen: “that’s a sufficient reason for effacing it from history”. (Chomsky, 2005, 94).

Discussing *The Decline* “The US film reviewers want stability”, writes Wilkins, “in their interpretation of film, to the point of projecting their own themes that are easily identifiable and could secure these stability”. (1995, 130). He explains that the Hollywood production machine influences interpretations in America with films categorised and based on a formulaic structure. One can also argue that this lack of critical position and the need for stability is also driven by an absence (in main stream culture) of intellectual self-criticism, which is supported by an awareness of one’s own position of empowerment. Arcand was generally not understood by the mainstream US film critics and his *The Decline* was generally dismissed. (Wilkins, 1995, 131). The film narrative was either rejected as irrelevant, criticised as not being Canadian, or being overly provincial and parochial. If we compare the critical responses that *The Decline* received with its corresponding sequence, we can clearly see the change in US critical reception. This is not only because *The Invasion* is the more accomplished film and a heart-warming story of a dysfunctional family coming together through a son helping his terminally ill father. Into that universal theme of parental death, Arcand brings an historical and political stance on the destruction of the present day American Empire. It could be argued that a change in the socio-political framing of an American national narrative after the events of September 11 had a significant impact on the reception of Arcand’s last film. The position of stability in American

fictionalised identity and national narrative was challenged by September 11 and the proceeding wars (malfunctioning 'war on terror' but successful imperial conquests of Afghanistan and Iraq, for now) and stability was replaced by uncertainty—the Empire has been struck—instability, vulnerability, mistrustfulness and questioning of accepted beliefs and values starts to dominate national narrative. Bombing in war/s—fictionalised on film—or in CNN version of 'media-reality' allowed American public to observe someone else; to look at the suffering of others—but with the September 11 events this position was subverted and fiction became replaced with reality—where 'the other' became 'our own' bombing—a reality.

In *The Barbarian* Sebastian comes back to Quebec from London—from the outside, in fact Remy's children, a new Quebecoise generation, are living outside of Quebec. Solutions to Remy's medical treatment are sought outside the Quebec and Canadian national boundaries by physically crossing the borders into the USA. Sebastian's friend, who advises him about his father's illness, is a successful doctor in US. Indeed, Arcand is 'free' to talk about outsides because he is in a location that is in between hegemonic centres. This in-between position is liberating, it is a non-location that is not ideologically charged—that does not have to declare its alliance to a narrative of a dominate power but be open for multiple narratives.

At the core of Arcand's filmmaking is a trajectory made up of the interaction between religion, politics and history. By following Remy through the last days of his life and his questioning of God and his own accomplishment in life, Arcand is exposing the present day obsession with materialism and fast solutions, with money and financial values that undermines everything else once placed in a contradictory opposition to death. By contrasting present to past—to a set of chosen historical references—slaughter of Natives in North America, Hitler or Stalin's death camps—Arcand emphasizes temporality and febleness of Western post-capitalist glorification of life as a commodity, an advertisement for a new brand that has to keep consumers attracted. It is in this synthesis that evolves from oppositions between present and past; father and son; Canada and the US that his auteur perspective and dialectical approach are the most apparent. The world that Arcand represents is obsessed with power and control. He juxtaposes a world where there is no belief in a cause greater than oneself interest, where individual interests are overriding any social or collective morality as represented by Sebastian, to Remy's world of passion, idealism and collectivism, of nostalgia for a glorified past. In *The Jesus* and *The Barbarian* the new world order is one in which money is the main language of communication and forms the core of connections and inter-

actions between people. By suggesting that any human relations outside of a commercial—money driven and defined framework, is not functional or even not possible, Arcand is giving a definitive position on contemporary culture that has lost the sense of community and collective belief, in a perpetual struggle to obtain power.

Bibliography

- Arcand, Denys. (1995). “I only know where I am coming from not where I am going”, In Conversation with André Loiselle” in André Loiselle and Brian McIlroy (eds), *Auteur/Provocateur The Films of Denys Arcand*. Trowbridge: Flick Books, 36–161.
- Arcand, Deny (2003) *The Barbarian Invasion*, DVD film, Artificial Eye.
- Boardwell, David. (1993). *The Cinema of Eisenstein*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chomsky, Naom (2005) *Imperial Ambitions*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Eisenstein, Sergei (1929) “The Dialectical Approach to Film Form” in Brudady Leo and Cohen Marshall (eds), (2004) *Film Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 6th edition), 23–41. See also Eisenstein S.M. (1988): Richard Taylor (ed), *S.M.Eisenstein’s Writtings 1922–1934* (London: British Film Institute, 1988).
- Gittings, Christopher E. (2002). *Canadian National Cinema: Ideology, Difference and Representation*. London: Routledge.
- Harcourt, Peter.(2006). “The Decline of the American Empire” in Jerry White (ed), *The Cinema of Canada* (London: Wallflower Press), 143–150.
- Imboden, Roberta (2005) “The Barbarian Invasions (Les Invasions barbares),” *Film Quarterly* 58 (3), 48–52.
- Loiselle André (2003) *Stage-bound*. Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press.
- Melnyk, George. (2002). “Book Review Essay: Reflections on Canadian Cinema” in William Beard and Jerry White (eds), *North of Everything: Canadian Cinema since 1980*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press.
- Testa, Bart. (1995). “Arcand’s double-twisted allegory: *Jesus of Montreal*” in André Loiselle and Brian McIlroy (eds) *Auteur/Provocateur: The Films of Denys Arcand* (Trowbridge: Flick Books), 90–112.
- Véronneau, Pierre. (1995). “Alone and with others: Denys Arcand’s destiny within the Quebec cinematic and cultural context” in André Loiselle and

Brian McIlroy (eds), *Auteur/Provocateur The Films of Denys Arcand* (Trowbridge: Flick Books), 10–31.

Wilkins, Peter. (1995). “No big picture: Arcand and US Critics” in André Loiselle and Brian McIlroy (eds), *Auteur/Provocateur The Films of Denys Arcand* (Trowbridge: Flick Books), 113–135.