

Auteur/Provocateur: The Films of Denys Arcand. Edited by André Loiselle and Brian McIlroy. Published by Praeger and distributed by Greenwood Publishing. 195 pages. \$32.95 (CND).

THE APPEARANCE OF AUTEUR/PROVOCATEUR: THE FILMS OF DENYS ARCAND

COMES AT A PIQUANT MOMENT.

Consider the facts.

Arcand, who's 54 now, was one of the young Quebec filmmakers who started out with the National Film Board in the 1960s trying to break away from the restrictive heritage imposed on the NFB by John Grierson. Like Jacques Leduc and others, Arcand was seeking new forms of film narrative with which to circumvent the intent of his documentary assignments, something closer to fiction but suitable for use in exploring politics. Not surprisingly, he ended up accusing the Board of censorship. On at least one famous occasion, he walked out. He became a master of the film essay, but there was a long spell in the middle of his career when he was reduced to making everything from mini-series to commercials—whatever work he could find.

Unlike many *québécois* directors of his generation, ranging in accessibility from Paul Almond to Jean Pierre Lefebvre, Arcand never appeared particularly concerned with whether he was discovered by the outside world. As time went on, the distinction between his documentary work and his fictional narratives seemed to blur, in the sense that both were interested, first, last and always, in Quebec politics and problems.

He found a few new fans beyond the

borders of Quebec and Canada for each of his first three features: *La maudite galatée* (1971), a sort of *québécois Bonnie and Clyde*; *Réjeanne Padovani* (1973), a drama about corruption in the construction trades in Montreal; and *Gina* (1975), the intensely political story of an itinerant prostitute. But his was incidental to his purpose, for at this time he was, like so many Quebec artists, a strong sovereigntist, trying to lay the cultural foundations for a politically independent Quebec. More recently, of course, his situation has changed.

His brilliant film *Le déclin de l'empire américain* (1986), so gracefully and profoundly written, so casual in its riveting presentation of a particular moment in public and private affairs, became a commercial and critical success as *The Decline of the American Empire*. It seemed to touch a generational chord in the same way that Lawrence Kasdan's Hollywood film *The Big Chill* had done two years earlier. Despite their superficial similarities, however, comparing the two is like comparing Mordecai Richler's novel *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* to Budd Schulburg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* as stories about Jewish hustlers: you can't. *Jésus de Montréal* (1989) consolidated Arcand's reputation, both

under that title and, in the English-language market, as *Jesus of Montreal*. It is in this state of renown that André Loiselle and Brian McIlroy, two members of the University of British Columbia film studies department, find Arcand with their book, which is not intended for the Canadian market necessarily but rather for American and British audiences. (It is published by Praeger, famous for its film list, and distributed here by Greenwood Publishing.)

Appearing as it does so near the time of the Quebec referendum adds to the interest of *Auteur/Provocateur*, for Arcand has recently backed away from separatist politics—possibly from politics in general. At last report, he was, for the first time in his career, writing a script in English. In September, when he accepted one of the new Governor General's Performing Arts Awards (an act that would have been anathema to the old Arcand), he made this statement to the *Globe and Mail*: "I simply find that my preoccupations are elsewhere [than with the referendum]. For some time now I have felt simply that it doesn't matter which way the decision goes, it will not affect the work that I do." At almost that precise moment, separatist politicians in Quebec were convening a large conference of *québécois* artists, pop stars and media people to prop up their cause. "Asked about artists who refuse to become involved in the pro-sovereignty cause," the singer Paul Piché told the *Globe* that "a lot of them are sovereigntists but they don't want to take a stand publicly. We respect that."

To what extent, if at all, could Arcand fairly be included in the group Piché was referring to? Readers will get little help answering that question by consulting this anthology of articles and essays by eight critics (four francophones, four anglophones) who set out to survey the career of this outstanding filmmaker. But there are many other pleasures to be found here, as with Denise Perusse's discussion of gender roles in *American Empire* and a rich piece on *Jesus of Montreal* by the always provocative Bart Testa.

The feeling I was left with at the end was of Denys Arcand as someone who, after being voluntarily in and out of the limelight over the years, has backed away from the new and greater fame that has come seeking him. He has, like the artist he is, retreated further into the workings of his own imagination ●

