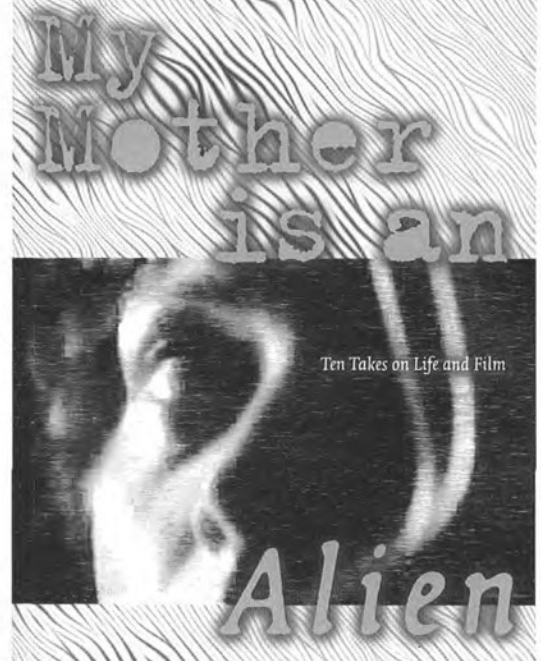


My Mother Is an Alien: Ten Takes on Life and Film by George Melnyk, The Banff Centre Press, Alberta, 2004. \$18.95.

REVIEWED BY PETER HARCOURT

A prolific writer, George Melnyk has published books on regional, national and international topics, including the two-volume *Literary History of Alberta*. More recently he has sashayed into film, having just completed his ambitious *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* for the University of Toronto Press—a book that may well become a standard introduction to the subject.

that Melnyk dubs the Jesus trilogy—he discovers a personal trajectory that parallels his own. Each of these three films discuss death and dying, and the link between them is Arcand's Catholic upbringing. If *Le Déclin* is a portrait of Arcand's intellectual universe, then *Jésus* serves as an antithesis to its secular preoccupations, while *Les Invasions* synthesizes the two. The latter film expresses, better than any other I have seen, the unity of the temporal (*Le Déclin*) and the sacred



books

In the course of this activity, he has also written *My Mother Is an Alien: Ten Takes on Life and Film*. By interweaving film comment with personal memory, the book returns us to that state of viewing with which we all began, relating characters on the screen not to some theoretical system but to similar characters in our own lives. Immigrating to Canada with his parents after the war, Melnyk is acutely aware of his need to negotiate a new identity as a Euro-Canadian based in the West, and equally aware of the Aboriginal presence that surrounds him. Movies have helped him in these negotiations.

A lapsed Ukrainian Catholic, he retains a respect for the imagery of the church, for its mythical implications. Faced with the success of Denys Arcand's *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*, *Jésus de Montréal* and *Les Invasions barbares*—a group of films

the daily power of the material world.

This is not the language of academic discourse. It is the language of someone who recognizes that the quest for a spiritual dimension in cultural life is inseparable from the moral priorities of the individual. In *Clearcut*, a film directed in 1991 by Richard Bugajski—also raised as a Catholic—Melnyk evokes the psychological speculations of Carl Gustav Jung to find in the apparently sadistic Arthur (Graham Greene) the “shadow” of the lawyer, Peter Maguire (Ron Lea) in his denial of his fear of a wilderness the law cannot subdue. Paralleling this discussion are accounts of Melnyk's father and of the loss of status immigrants must endure in order to establish themselves in a new land.

The title of the book stems from Melnyk's reading of the *Alien* tetralogy of films in terms of the power of Ripley (Sigourney

Jésus) as opposites that are woven into every life. There is no human life without a sense of the sacred and there is no human life that does not experience

Weaver)—a strong woman in a world of weaker men. He finds these films a tribute to women who, when faced with a crisis—an invasion; an immigration—hold the family together. There are similarly maverick readings of *Gandhi*, *Das Boot*, *Léolo* and *Highway 61*, relating the issues of these films to Melnyk's own experiences as an allophone other in his adopted land. These readings might seem quirky were it not for the pervasive sense of Melnyk's personal quest—his constant self-questioning and his concern with the ways in which, sometimes through movies, life takes on meaning. “Reconciling private, first-hand narratives with common public images,” Melnyk explains, “is how anyone creates a personal truth.”

Finally, *My Mother Is an Alien* is a sensitively spiritual personal exploration and not without insight—no matter how idiosyncratic—into the films the author has chosen to adduce.

Peter Harcourt is one of the most distinguished figures in Canadian film scholarship. His many books and hundreds of articles have raised the profile of Canadian film both nationally and internationally.