



by Kevin McMahon

Jésus de Montréal

and the Culture of Nihilism

I have to begin with a confession: when I was asked to write something about my “favourite Canadian film,” my first reaction was to chuckle. It was a knee-jerk, nasty and reactionary response, and I was left feeling embarrassed and a little confused. There are many films made in Canada that I admire very much. And, yet, this request had touched a deep and vague and, clearly, negative wellspring of feeling in me about contemporary Canadian films as a body of work. It’s a feeling that I only began to understand as I analyzed my choice – which was so obvious as to seem deadly dull – and realized what was unique about Denys Arcand’s *Jésus de Montréal*.

It is a film which begins where so many Canadian films ultimately arrive: at the understanding that we live in a culture of nihilism which is the inevitable product of empire. The conditions that our situation imposes upon us were, of course, deftly

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explored by Arcand in *Le déclin de l'empire américain*, a film which makes much the same argument as *Jésus de Montréal*. But the Christ story gives Arcand the scope to push the point further and show that nihilism is not merely an imperial phenomenon nor a specifically modern one connected to the clipboard omnipotence of the United States (to say nothing of the tin-pot imperial yearnings of English Canada). Rather, I think, the film argues that nihilism is woven into the very fabric of human "civilization."

The film's prologue is the climax of a Dostoevsky-inspired play set in Russia at the turn of the century, when it seemed that the horrid empire of the Romanovs would never collapse. The hero is outraged and defeated by his realization that the world will not "improve," no matter how many philosophers prove that it theoretically could. He hangs himself in heroic defiance of God – to great gusts of applause from the sort of portly and manicured audience which is always most eager for existential desperation and the implicit justification it contains. "It's so...so...implicating," proclaims a perfume-drenched TV critic with a trill in her voice that explains the thrill of suburban S&M.

As the film progresses, this common coin of contemporary civilization – bearing hopeless defiance of whatever one calls God on one face and easy deification of the self on the other – is constantly flipped backward and forward in time, its head continually bearing the marking of a different empire. So the Romanovs become the Roman Catholic Church becomes the québécois media elite, a lower order – akin to the Grey Nuns – in the great, world-embracing holy American empire of mass media. The point is that there is no difference of motive or comprehension between Robert Lepage's effete Pilote sentencing Lothaire Bluteau's Jesus with the casual comfort that "one of our philosophers said that the ability to kill himself is the greatest gift of man," and a predatory entertainment lawyer who offers Bluteau's Daniel – the actor – the gift of burying his art in the grave of celebrity by publishing his memoirs at the age of 33. "I didn't say write," the lawyer grins, "I said publish."

The difference from the individual's viewpoint, the film argues, is unimagin-

ably great. But from the standpoint of the empire itself, the question is merely one of efficiencies. The Romans, with their cruder information technologies, had to murder heretics; the Catholic Church, when it finally plodded past that phase, could excommunicate them; the Empire of the Image, in which we live, has come to the refined point of being able to co-opt almost everyone and has the luxury of knowing that those who remain marginal will be silenced by the general din. But the real point is that no empire can afford to ignore or accept the truth contained in the message of Christ or a million other prophets: all our grand structures, even civilization itself, are built on a promise of immortality that they clearly cannot fulfil. It is only through our collective suspension of disbelief that they are allowed to stand at all. "All great events, even theatre," cries Arcand's dying Jesus, "result from a want of happiness."

To some degree, Arcand's analysis is part of an inheritance that is so common to Canadian films – and so linked to style – that it seems almost genetic. Our films have grown out of a mottled soil that mixes institutional documentary, Hollywood movies and European art cinema. Warmed by the strange and coincidental rays of our particular place and time, this soil has produced the post-modern aesthetic, which thoroughly informs the best films the country has to offer. And that aesthetic, in turn, implies an understanding of the world in which we live – of the commonality of human structures – built right into it. It is only the most moronic directors of TV commercials and rock videos who can employ this aesthetic and fail to grasp its meaning. What makes Denys Arcand a master craftsman is that he can lift cinematic post-modernism beyond collage or parody to interweave the styles, ideas and dramas of many eras fluidly into a whole and cathartic reflection of the essential tragedy of human society. What makes him a great artist is that he has the vision and wisdom to ground that tragedy in the infinitely complex truths of the human heart.

And so, in the scene which follows the triumphant debut of their passion play, the actors walk down off the mountain revelling – except for Daniel/Jesus, who mopes at the knowledge that the Catholic Church will not allow their rev-

olutionary play to continue for long. And in that moment – before the other actors cajole him into accepting his own preaching to savour the happiness that is momentarily theirs – Arcand shows us that the vain and sullen will to value our utopian structures above the human happiness that is allegedly their purpose is present in all of us; present even in Christ himself. And we suddenly realize how Christianity could develop into a force that is diametrically opposed to all that Christ believed in.

It is, I think, that ability and commitment to push the point to its ultimate and withering conclusion that makes *Jésus de Montréal* one of cinema's great works and quite exceptional by Canadian standards. Because it is so thorough in its exploration of our hopeless condition, the film arrives quite naturally at a conclusion which is filled with hope and utterly subversive: that is love and only love – love of ourselves, our families, our neighbours, and our most bitter enemies, including all those foolish imperialists – which can shatter the structures that blind us and reveal them as the irrelevant things that they are. "I am abandoned, my father," Jesus cries as he collapses. "But we are with you," comes the reply from his friend and his lover. The impulse of the father that drives up all of our tall buildings will always desert us, leaving behind a riddle of the heart which can only be answered by love.

Arcand's great achievement with *Jésus de Montréal* – indeed all of his recent work – is to delve into our need for righteous bolstering and to show that it comes from the same place that built Washington and London and St. Petersburg and Rome. His intelligence allows him to understand that the typical Canadian experience of alienation (and its more extreme version in Quebec) is not a wrong which must be rectified but a terminal, wonderful and completely irrelevant condition. What *Jésus de Montréal* tells us is that we are all aliens; all alone. Our great and eminently possible task is to find a way of grace in which to come together. And that is what makes *Jésus de Montréal* my favorite film. It refuses to side with nihilism and refuses, thus, to squander our meagre, but precious, cinematic inheritance ●

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