



Between Desire and Design

THE PASSIONATE, SCEPTICAL CINEMA OF DENYS ARCAND

BY TOM MCSORLEY

"I can't bear people who don't want to see what appears to me to be reality. That's why I make films, for those who cannot see what is there." Denys Arcand

"You can't expect a film to give answers to everything." Denys Arcand

For Denys Arcand, these two apparently contradictory statements make elegant, Cartesian sense. They also articulate precisely his approach to a remarkable cinematic career that has managed to indeed show us "what is" while avoiding the temptation to give "answers to everything."



PHOTO: MAX FILMS

Mia Kirshner in *Love and Human Remains*

Denys Arcand has created, out of a rigorous intelligence and an inexhaustible sense of irony, a passionate and engaged cinema

From his obscure days at the National Film Board in the early 1960s to the international successes of *Le déclin de l'empire américain* (1986) and *Jésus de Montréal*, Denys Arcand has created, out of a rigorous intelligence and an inexhaustible sense of irony, a passionate and engaged cinema sceptical both of the world it explores and of its own powers of exploration.

Irony of Canadian ironies, he got famous in the process. In addition to capturing innumerable Genie Awards here in Canada, Arcand's films have won many international honours, including a prestigious Cannes Jury Prize for *Jésus de Montréal* and an Oscar nomination for *Le déclin*. In what can only be described as the ultimate and bizarre form of imperial flattery, he was even offered first right of refusal to direct an Americanized, Hollywood remake of *Le déclin*. (He claimed his right and refused.) All this acclaim and attention aside, Denys Arcand continues to make thoughtful films about the complex, troubling state of things in the late 20th Century. His latest feature, *Love and Human Remains*, which received its Canadian premiere at the 1993 Festival of Festivals in Toronto, is only the most recent example.

Throughout his impressive 30-year career in both fiction and documentary, Arcand has investigated the collision between individual and collective desire, and a rigidly designed social, political and economic universe. Such collisions form the basis of his once banned exposé on the Quebec textile industry, *On est au coton* (1970); his astute drama about political corruption, *Réjeane Padovani* (1972); his ferocious assessment of the 1980 referendum on sovereignty association, *Le confort et l'indifférence* (1981);

his witty, Bergmanesque examination of Quebec intellectuals, *Le déclin de l'empire américain* (1986); his stunning re-imagining of the underlying myth of his Catholic heritage, *Jésus de Montréal* (1989); and his kinetic adaptation of the Brad Fraser play about love and death in the 1990s, *Love and Human Remains*. It is no surprise then, at this intensely fascinating moment in the history of our peculiar nation (itself a clamour of orthodoxies about designs for living and the dangers of desire), that the impassioned and sceptical Arcand *oeuvre* appears ever more compelling, ever more relevant.

The beginnings of this *oeuvre* seem almost accidental. The son of a St. Lawrence river pilot, Denys Arcand was born in 1941 in Deschambault, Quebec, on the river's north shore between Montreal and Quebec City. On his father's insistence that his children get a good education, the Arcand family moved to Montreal where young Denys attended a Jesuit college. After graduating, he pursued his studies in history at the University of Montreal, obtaining a Master's degree. As he observes, "I figured it was interesting, but I didn't know what to do with my life."

While at university, he dabbled in theatre, working as a stagehand at the *Théâtre du Nouveau Monde*. More importantly, Arcand co-directed and co-wrote a short feature film in 1962, entitled *Seul ou avec d'autres*. Made independently, it is a pseudo-documentary on student life. Improvisational and inquisitive, and borrowing heavily from the emerging *cinéma vérité* documentary style (location shooting, hand-held cameras, rejection of voice-over narration, etc.), it is an important beginning in Arcand's development as a filmmaker in the richly creative milieu of Quebec in the early 1960s.

Later that year, Arcand was hired by the National Film Board (in his words,

"by chance") to research Canadian history for a series of documentaries being prepared for the 1967 Centennial celebrations. He recalls wryly, "they hired me to do research on the history of Canada. They tried to find a writer and director for the series, based on the research I had done, but nobody at the Board was interested. I was then asked to try my hand at writing and directing." In a strangely appropriate Canadian way, NFB's institutional inertia and indifference to Canadian history helped launch one of the most significant filmmaking careers in Canadian cinema.

Moreover, it would be a career which would not only demonstrate just how far from boring history can be, but also challenge the very foundations of the institution that got Denys Arcand started. His first films, short documentaries about discovering the New World (*Champlain* [1963, about the explorer Samuel de Champlain], *La route de l'ouest* [1964], and *Les Montréalistes* [1965, about the founding of Montreal]) brought him immediately into conflict with his producers. Arcand recalls, "as soon as I started making films about history, I began to get into trouble, because the way I was seeing history was far different from the way the government thought it should be seen."

Exasperated with the limitations of the National Film Board, Arcand returned to Deschambault for a year to escape, rest, play hockey (which he still does, incidentally, in Montreal), and figure a way, as he



put it, "to give cinema a last chance."

It was a time of several "last chances" in the Quebec of the 1960s. Arcand's formative artistic years coincide with the growth of the separatist political movement, mounting an increasingly militant opposition to English-Canadian and American domination of the Quebec economy, and outright rejection of the Catholic church as a relevant moral and spiritual guide in a modernizing Quebec society. For Arcand, and other filmmakers of his generation, the desires of the new Quebec could no longer be accommodated by the old, ossified designs of the province's *ancien régime* of politicians, priests, and unilingual English corporate executives. In short, history was now to be lived, imagined, invented, not merely read about or passively accepted.

The prevailing attitude of radical

scepticism also influenced methods of film production. Many filmmakers at the time adopted a collaborative approach, working collectively to make personally and politically engaged films. Denys Arcand began working in cinema this way on *Seul ou avec d'autres*. He worked as a writer on Michel Brault's, *Entre la mer et l'eau douce* (1967), and acted in films by his contemporaries. This collective approach is evident throughout Arcand's career up to and including *Love and Human Remains*. Without excep-



Arcand directing *La maudite galette*: a dark, fatalistic tale



Réjeanne Padovani: Arcand implicates politicians, advisors, the media and the church in preserving a savage border

tion, his films use ensemble casts rather than individual stars, and focus more on collective rather than individual dramas.

Beginning with *On est au coton*, Arcand has written for television (*Duplessis* in 1977) and directed (in English) three episodes of *Empire, Inc.* in 1983 for CBC-TV, written and directed ten feature length films, and a short drama as part of the 1991 anthology film, *Montréal vu par...* This protean output has consistently attempted to expose what is hidden, say what is unsaid, and interrogate what is unquestioned. Indeed, Arcand's primary strength as a filmmaker, evident at the outset but increasingly pronounced as he matures, is his ability to ask unsettling and awkward questions, to investigate simultaneously his subject matter, his audience and, ultimately, himself.

Perhaps the most directly interrogative, fiercely sceptical works in the Arcand filmography are his three documentaries about Quebec produced between 1970 and 1981: *On est au coton* (1970, released in 1976), *Québec: Duplessis et après...* (1972), and *Le confort et l'indifférence* (1981). Although conceived separately, these three films form a loose trilogy of Arcand's disenchantment and disillusionment with Quebec politics. Chronicling Quebec's gradual and, for Arcand, reluctant movement away from the harsh, control of the Duplessis era through to the brink of independence under René Lévesque, these films offer incisive, occasionally ruthless assessments of that province's history and political culture: past, present and perhaps, Arcand wonders throughout, future.

Produced for the NFB while he was working as a freelance director, *On est au coton* is a study of working conditions in the Quebec textile industry. Described by Arcand as an "arid, three hour black-and-white documentary," the film's revelations of inhuman working conditions, failed strikes, and church and government collusion to crush unions so offended the textile executives to whom it was shown, that the film was suppressed by the Board.

Consisting of interviews with workers and managers, newsreel footage of



Gina: a story of brutal revenge

church and state leaders, tracking shots through infinite labyrinths of automated looms, Godardian inter-titles, and horrific testimonials about abysmal working conditions, Arcand's sprawling work evolved into something quite different from what the filmmakers had anticipated. He observes, "we shot for one year, always in total confusion, because we couldn't find what we were looking for—revolution." Only later did Arcand realize that "what we were doing was not a film about revolt, but a film about res-

ignation." This lesson in the open-ended possibilities of the documentary was complemented by the irony of the banning, which, as Arcand notes, "at one blow established my reputation in Quebec."

Arcand's next feature length documentary, *Québec: Duplessis et après...*, attempts to get at the roots of a political process which permits such collusion to exist. A sly and often mordant comparison of Maurice Duplessis' Union Nationale governments of the 1930s and



Québec: Duplessis et après...: the roots of a political process

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the Liberal party under Robert Bourassa in the election of 1970, the film is a withering look at the political process. Inter-cutting newsreel footage of Duplessis' speeches during the election of 1936 with Bourassa's in 1970, Arcand, borrowing a page from Emile de Antonio, asks his audience: "what has changed?" Of course, the mere posing of this question can be seen, like the election of a lone Parti Québécois candidate at the end of the film, as the first step toward change. Ever the sceptic, however, Arcand does not shrink from revealing the same indulgence in populist clichés and corrupt tendencies already apparent in the PQ's election strategy. As passionate and politically prescient as the film is, it does not entirely escape Arcand's ability to reveal old designs creeping into fresh new ideals.

When *Le confort et l'indifférence* appears about a decade later, the question of what has changed is even more disturbing. An imaginative essay on the 1980 sovereignty-association referendum campaign, the film is narrated by European history's doyen of *realpolitik*, Niccolò Machiavelli, who coolly assesses how and why the *Non* forces, under Pierre Elliott Trudeau (Machiavelli's "Prince" incarnate), defeated the separatist camp. The concluding montage of tv beer commercials, bingo festivals, church masses in the Olympic Stadium, care-free boat owners on the St. Lawrence and vulgar auto shows is one of the most ferocious and dispirited sequences Arcand has created. There is a concrete sense of betrayal in *Le confort*, as if Arcand had suspended his scepticism during the referendum campaign and was saddened and angered to discover that so little had actually changed in

modern Quebec. The questions posed in *Québec: Duplessis et après...* remained unanswered.

Arcand's formal approach in these three documentaries is significant. He rejects the hoary assumptions of Griersonian documentary "objectivity" and incorporates distancing devices such as historical figures (Machiavelli in *Le confort*), readers citing historical texts (the Durham Report of 1838 in *Québec: Duplessis et après...*), and inter-titles ("The most effective political device is the machine," in *On est au coton*). These formal strategies further emphasize Arcand's sense that if history must be analyzed, so too must the non-fiction film which claims to represent it. In other words, he will try to show "what is," but he cannot give definitive answers, only new contexts for more and better questions.

Within his equally intelligent and impressive fictional universe, questions about Quebec and beyond are reconstituted but are similarly provocative and sophisticated. In this sense, rather than a separate body of work, Arcand's fictional features offer parallel and often more subtle observations on a Quebec society in transition. Like the documentaries, they expand accepted conventions. In Arcand's cinema, the form always asks to be interrogated, probed and questioned as much as it is engaged in interrogating, probing and questioning.

His films of the 1970s are especially revealing in this light. Each in its own way concerned with failed escapes from a dreary, pre-destined order of things—*La maudite galette* (1971), *Réjeanne Padovani* (1972), and *Gina* (1974); each also demonstrates Arcand's scepticism about and subversion of conventional narrative cinema.

In *La maudite galette* (a dark and fatalist tale of an impoverished working-class couple who, with a drifter accomplice, rob and kill an uncle for his life savings), Arcand subverts crime film conventions with a slow, deliberate pacing and a *mise-en-scène* which emphasizes distance. The film is largely constructed with long takes and shots, draining the action of intimacy and forcing the audience to question why the action may be

taking place. Alternating between Montreal's blackened industrial wastelands and the dark, forbidding Quebec countryside, *La maudite galette* is the fictional *huis clos* companion to *On est au coton*.

Réjeanne Padovani continues Arcand's unflinching and astute examination of the corrupt political structures of Quebec in the 1970s. This claustrophobic drama about construction boss Vincent Padovani's assassination of his estranged wife during celebrations over a new highway contract implicates the mayor, senior provincial politicians, back room advisors, the media, and the church in the preservation of this savage order. Within the course of the evening, his wife and a group of activists opposed to the highway, are disposed of by Padovani's henchmen. Confined almost exclusively to Padovani's suburban Montreal home—living room for the powerful; basement for their employees—the film is a frank assessment of power politics. With its austere visual style and unremittingly dark ironies, *Réjeanne Padovani* is a chillingly rendered interrogation of a closed and terrible social design.

Set outside the urban centre of Montreal, Arcand's next film, *Gina*, locates the political, social, and economic malaise in the often-romanticized Quebec hinterland. The tale of a stripper in a small town befriended by a documentary crew making a film about the local textile mill (Arcand's poke at the NFB), *Gina* soon descends into violence when a group of unemployed men gang rape her, setting off an extraordinary series of destructive events which underscore the powerlessness of all concerned. Beyond *Gina*'s potent narrative, Arcand's brilliant fusion of fiction and documentary styles in the film not only registers the uncertainty of the world these characters inhabit, but also emphasizes the moral, political and economic structures which entrap and brutalize them.

Within the last decade, Arcand's fiction films have expanded their questions beyond the overtly political. He has said, "I don't know any way to reduce the human soul to a rational political statement. It is always broader than that,



The women of *Le déclin*: "It is impossible to understand the age you live in."



always deeper." While concerned with the state of things in Quebec, Arcand's frame of reference for the questions has enlarged to include ideas of mortality, memory, and the possibility of redemptive love (a notion totally absent in his earlier fictions). His scepticism of certainty and design, however, remains and his characters still struggle to manoeuvre in a world of reduced expectations, failed desires and technological dread.

Scepticism is inscribed in *Le déclin* in the lingering tableau of nature integrated into the actions and incessant transient language of the film's self-absorbed intellectuals. Despite their witty repartee and well-wrought theories about contemporary culture, Arcand suggests that these cynical, over-sexed, upper middle class orphans of the 1980 referendum cannot come to terms with the world they live in. Fittingly and, as always in Arcand, ironically, it is the most naive character in the film, Claire, who has been blind to her husband's infidelities for two decades, whom Arcand allows to utter the film's most banal yet most profound observation: "It is impossible to understand the age you live in."

A justly celebrated film which wittily undercuts the urbane certitudes of its promiscuous, pill-popping baby boom-

ers, particularly in the somber second half, *Le déclin de l'empire américain* is sharply critical of Arcand's own seemingly aimless and unsatisfied generation. After all, Arcand did say of this film, "Those characters aren't insects I'm looking at. Not at all. They're my friends, they're me."

As personalized and effective as *Le déclin* is, it is in Arcand's masterpiece, *Jésus de Montréal* that all his satirical, historical, political and philosophical tendencies coalesce. Not only does the film mock religious, artistic and corporate pretensions in its tale of a theatre group trying to mount an alternate version of the Passion Play on Mont Royal, it also plants scepticism firmly at the epicentre of its narrative—what is to be believed? Integrating television programs and advertisements into his narrative, Arcand pursues this question to Borgesian lengths. The film blurs reality and fiction within its own fictional universe, when an actor portraying Christ grows Christ-like, and when, in several dazzling sequences, the actual performance of the play within the film becomes indistinguishable from the film itself. More than questioning the nature of faith and of representation, *Jésus de Montréal* is Arcand's most fully realized expression of the necessity to question



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any singular, exclusive interpretation of social, political, economic, or spiritual reality. As bold and open-ended as a narrative film can be, it is a film which has captured, more completely than any of his earlier work in fiction or documentary, Denys Arcand's personal poetics of doubt.

Arcand downplays his role in his first feature film in English, *Love and Human Remains*. As he explains, "I put on my director's cap and tried to do the best job possible for Brad Fraser's script." Nevertheless, the film does bear aspects of Arcand's directorial imprint: its ensemble cast and several strands of simultaneous action recall both *Le déclin* and *Réjeanne Padovani*; its examination of the difficulty of desire in a technolog-

ically designed world also connects with his previous work. His cinematic weaving of today's ubiquitous video imagery into the various interconnected stories of young people trying to survive a hostile urban environment also adds an imaginative, original dimension to his adaptation of Fraser's play.

Like his contemporaries in and outside Quebec, Denys Arcand has explored in his own particular manner the critical fissure of contemporary Canadian experience: as a relatively conservative nation (remembering that English and French Canada were founded on loyalty to European traditions, not revolution), we often confront the disparity between desire and social structures which impede it. As our largely fatalist cinema has artic-

ulated year after year, desire usually dissolves in the face of established design.

The intelligence of Arcand's cinema is that it illuminates both the powers and limitations of not only individual and collective desires, but also the existing social, political and economic designs against which they struggle. All those who populate the cinema of Denys Arcand, in fiction and documentary, must navigate this tension between desire and design. Given his passionate and engaged body of work, it is evident that Arcand is sceptical of his own powers. No one knows more than Arcand that filmmakers cannot give the answers to everything, but at their best, they can enable us to see what is there and prompt us to think about what is not •



**Jésus de Montréal:
Arcand's masterpiece**