



Conceptualizing Quebec National Cinema: Denys Arcand's Cycle of Post-Referendum Films as Case Study

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Over the past half century, Quebec cinema has grown from small beginnings into an industry that regularly produces feature films that win critical recognition and festival prizes around the globe. At the same time, it is one of the few places in the world where local products can occasionally outdraw Hollywood blockbusters at the box office. This essay analyzes the Quebec film industry, examines what types of films it produces and for what audiences, and explores the different ways domestic and international audiences understand its films. The pioneer figure in introducing Quebec cinema to mainstream audiences beyond the province is writer-director Denys Arcand. His cycle of films dealing with the failure of his generation to achieve independence for Quebec offers both a paradigm of a type of film newly important to the Quebec industry, and a case study in explaining how and why certain films cross borders into foreign markets.

Of particular interest in this essay are Arcand's *Le déclin de l'empire américain* (1986), *Jésus de Montréal* (1989) and *Les invasions barbares* (2003), all of which had successful commercial releases in international markets, including the United States, a rare occurrence for a Quebec film. One reason this international popularity is of interest is that the films' politics, central to their narratives, were and are controversial in Quebec. However, this political aspect is largely invisible to non-Quebec audiences, who appreciate the films for their other qualities, a tendency that can be seen in a handful of recent Quebec films that have also received international commercial distribution.

This essay examines Quebec film releases and box office returns to establish the existence of a largely Montreal-based industry that annually produces a group of

French-language films, some of which are very popular in its domestic market, and whose share of that market grew impressively in the early 2000s. This leads to the question of what kind of industry is making these films. Is it a national cinema? If so, what are the components of this national cinema? Does it produce different kinds of films? If so, do they have different rationales for financing and are they made for different audiences? How are these films received outside of the province? This essay uses rival concepts of national cinema to examine these questions and to distinguish the difference between Quebec's French-language cinema and the cinema (or cinemas) of the rest of the country. Having discussed Quebec cinema as an industry and as a national cinema, this essay then pursues an auteurist analysis of a series of films made by writer-director Denys Arcand which examine the province and Arcand's generation following the failure of the nationalist option in the 1980 referendum on Quebec independence. This cycle of films provides a case study of the evolution of Quebec cinema over the past few decades. Arcand's films can be seen as examples of what Bill Marshall calls "mass-audience-friendly auteur cinema," a type of Quebec film whose numbers expanded rapidly in the 2000s. Further, of these films which combine elements of both popular and art cinema, Arcand's "referendum cycle" offers clues as to why some, but only some, have been able to secure international commercial distribution.

Quebec Cinema as a National Cinema

The first problem with conceptualizing Quebec cinema as a national cinema is raised by Toby Miller, who asks: "When we are told a national cinema exists, does that mean it is produced in a particular country or that it is the cinema mostly watched in that country?"¹ This is relevant because Quebec's screens are dominated by Hollywood releases, which accounted for 75% of box office receipts in 2009 and 83% in 2010.² In the latter year, the Hollywood blockbuster *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) was such a runaway hit in the province that it earned more money at the box office than all the

¹ Toby Miller, "National Cinema Abroad: The International Division of Cultural Labor, from Production to Viewing," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Natasa Durovicova and Kathleen Newman (New York: Routledge, 2010), 143.

² Brendan Kelly, "Hollywood Totally Dominating Quebec Box Office," *The Montreal Gazette*, January 16, 2011, accessed April 26, 2014, <http://blogs.montrealgazette.com/2011/01/16/hollywood-totally-dominating-quebec-box-office/>.

Quebec films made that year combined.³ Still, the roughly 20% of the domestic market that Quebec films earned annually since 2000, peaking at 26% in 2005,⁴ is very respectable in the face of Hollywood hegemony, although this became less true after this share dropped sharply to 10% in 2011 and then to 5% in 2012.⁵

Despite this worrying drop in box office share, the progress of Quebec cinema can be measured by noting that while only two films sold at least 100,000 tickets in 2000, in every year but one between 2001 and 2011, at least five films reached that mark, peaking at eleven films in 2004. The one exception is 2006, when the bilingual comedy *Bon Cop Bad Cop* (Érik Canuel, 2006) drew over 1.3 million customers by itself.⁶ Even in a disastrous year like 2012, when not a single Quebec film dented the year's domestic top ten for the first time since the 1990s, there were still three films passing the 100,000-ticket mark.⁷ There was a minor improvement in 2013, when again three films sold 100,000 tickets and *Louis Cyr* (Daniel Roby, 2013), a period biography of the legendary Quebec strongman, made Quebec's box office top ten by drawing nearly half a million customers and earning over \$4 million.⁸ This has not (yet) turned out to be the start of a sustained commercial revival, but films are still being produced, many of high quality, and every year at least a few achieve wide domestic exposure. Given this, it is

³ Kelly, "Hollywood"; Charles-Henri Ramond, "Page Box Office des Films Québécois," *Films du Québec*, accessed April 25, 2014, <http://www.filmsquebec.com/box-office-des-films-quebecois/>.

⁴ Pierre Véronneau, "Genres and Variations: The Audiences of Quebec Cinema," in *Self Portraits: The Cinemas of Canada since Telefilm*, eds. André Loiselle and Tom McSorley, (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 2006), 117. Bill Marshall offers alternate figures in "Quebec Cinema 2005," pegging the domestic box office percentage of Quebec films as closer to 12%, which remains an impressive increase over their 1990s box office share. Unfortunately, he does not provide the source of his figures, but it at least raises a warning flag concerning Véronneau's numbers. Bill Marshall, "Quebec Cinema 2005," *Vertigo* 2.9 (2005), accessed February 24, 2016. http://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo_magazine/volume-2-issue-9-autumn-winter-2005/quebec-cinema-2005/

⁵ Elizabeth Lepage-Boily, "Box-office québécois 2012: Pire performance du cinéma québécois depuis 10 ans," *Actualité*, January 8, 2013, accessed April 26, 2014, <http://www.cinoche.com/actualites/box-office-quebecois-2012-pire-performance-du-cinema-quebecois-depuis-10-ans/index.html>.

⁶ Ramond, "Page box office."

⁷ Ibid. It should be noted that while Hollywood takes by far the largest share of Quebec's cinema box office, Quebec television has traditionally been dominated by domestic product, which partly accounts for the development of a local star system. See: Bill Marshall, *Quebec National Cinema* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 288.

⁸ Ibid.

possible to describe Quebec's film output as that of a mature national cinema with an established domestic audience.

There are some obvious limits to this essay. While my focus on box office earnings confines this discussion to theatrical feature films, a significant proportion of the cinema produced in the province consists of documentaries, short films, animation, experimental work, and, of course, television. These types of productions may involve different expectations regarding audiences and possibly significantly different rationales for funding decisions. Further, this analysis does not deal with First Nations or English-language productions, even those made by Arcand, seeing them as falling outside of this essay's definition of Quebec national cinema.

Much of the writing about Quebec as a national cinema has been concerned with justifying its claim of distinctiveness from English-Canadian cinema. Writing in the wake of the second failed referendum on Quebec sovereignty in 1995, Bill Marshall asserted that "Quebec certainly is a nation and has a national cinema,"⁹ while William Beard and Jerry White declared their support for a "two national cinemas' theory of Canadian cinema."¹⁰ Central to both Marshall and Beard and White's conception of Quebec cinema's distinctiveness is that its distinguishing characteristic is not only that it is produced in Quebec, but that it is also in French. It is an explicit rejection of the idea of a "coherent Canadian national self, composed of English and French elements" as naïve (Pierre) Trudeau-era federalist rhetoric.¹¹

Of course, the idea that Quebec national cinema is a French-language cinema is contested. As Pierre Véronneau points out, the term "cinéma québécois" can have varied meanings: "For some it meant a 'cinema made in Quebec,' for others a 'French-

⁹ Bill Marshall, *Quebec National Cinema*, x.

¹⁰ William Beard and Jerry White, "Introduction," in *North of Everything: English-Canadian Cinema since 1980*, eds. William Beard and Jerry White (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2002), xviii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

speaking cinema,' and for others still a 'cinema expressing the culture of Quebec.'"¹² In fact, the Quebec film industry is extremely varied. It includes foreign "runaway productions" (typically, but not exclusively, from Hollywood), which often use local crews and actors. There is a great deal of First Nations media production, particularly in the areas of documentary, TV and short films, as well as effectively bilingual productions like *Bon Cop Bad Cop*, *French Immersion* (Kevin Tierney, 2011) and *Funkytown* (Daniel Roby, 2011), which filmmakers hoped (vainly, for the most part) would appeal to both French and English audiences. The province also has a long tradition of English-language filmmaking, going back to Gordon Spaulding in the 1930s through to work by a varied group of filmmakers that includes Arthur Lipsett, Paul Almond, Ted Kotcheff, David Cronenberg, Robin Spry, Cynthia Scott, and, more recently, Jacob Tierney. There are even Francophone filmmakers, such as Maurice Devereaux, or even Denys Arcand himself with *Stardom* (2000), who have made films in English. Indeed, even if Quebec cinema is defined narrowly as only films produced in Quebec and in French by Francophone filmmakers, it is impossible to pretend there is no interaction with all the other cinemas going on around it.

This is at the heart of Andrew Higson's argument that the concept of national cinema captures neither the "internal diversity of contemporary cultural formations" nor the "overlaps and interpenetrations between different formations."¹³ For Higson, the concept constructs artificial, and often essentialist, categories which ignore the degree of cultural migration that occurs routinely in our globalized world and the extent to which cinema has always been a transnational industry. While Jerry White agrees with Higson that the national cinema label is typically used prescriptively rather than descriptively, privileging films that further a nationalist project and in this way distorting the reality of what films are actually being made, he still argues that, as an analytical tool, the term national cinema "remains a potentially useful lens through which to look at a diverse body of

¹² Pierre Véronneau, "Introduction," in *Self Portrait: Essays on the Canadian and Quebec Cinemas*, eds. Piers Handling and Pierre Véronneau (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1980), xi-xii.

¹³ Andrew Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," in *Cinema and Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 63.

work.”¹⁴ What is needed is specificity about what types of films constitute this body of work.

White writes that “films are a part of a given national cinema because of what they *are*, not because of what they *do*.”¹⁵ That is, a film does not have to engage with national themes or questions of identity. Any film produced by a “nation” is part of its national cinema, regardless of its content. However, White does not believe that all cinema produced in Quebec is necessarily part of Quebec national cinema. For example, he considers First Nations productions to be part of North American Aboriginal cinema, work that is “linked by a sense of non-geographically contiguous national belonging.”¹⁶ While White does not specifically address the question of the status of English-language films made in Quebec, he does write that the presence of a shared “national identity” is “crucial” for the existence of a national cinema.¹⁷ Given his earlier assertion that the lack of a “coherent Canadian national self, composed of English and French elements” precluded the inclusion of Quebec cinema as part of Canadian national cinema, then it is difficult to see him claiming English-language films as part of a coherent *Québécois* national cinema. Similarly, while Bill Marshall sees the province’s English-speaking minority as part of the Quebec nation, it is as an unassimilated “national minority” distinct from the majority “on which the Quebec nation is based.”¹⁸ Therefore, while there is an “important anglophone Quebec cinema,” it would be a “conceptual error” to include it as part of Quebec national cinema because “it is above all the French language which represents the distinctness of Quebec.”¹⁹ In addition, French-language films face greater difficulty in accessing the lucrative U.S. market than those in English, and this has a significant influence on what kinds of films are made in Quebec.

¹⁴ Jerry White, “National Belonging: Renewing the Concept of National Cinema for a Global Culture,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 2.2 (2004): 220.

¹⁵ White, “National Belonging,” 212. Author’s italics.

¹⁶ White, 225.

¹⁷ White, 224.

¹⁸ Marshall, *Quebec National Cinema*, x.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

While Marshall uses national cinema in what White would consider a descriptive way, surveying all types of the province's French-language feature films, he is more concerned with how themes in Quebec films relate to the questions posed by the evolving nature of a distinct Quebec national identity than he is by how the *types* of films made situates the film industry in terms of other national cinemas. However, he does offer a useful typology, dividing the bulk of Quebec's output into "auteur cinema" and "popular cinema," while suggesting that space had opened up for "a more mass-audience-friendly auteur cinema."²⁰ While auteur and popular films are each the subject of a chapter in his book, Marshall spends little time on the third category. This may be because at the time he was writing, in the late 1990s, Quebec cinema's share of its domestic box office was still less than 4%,²¹ and there were not that many of these types of films. Nor does Marshall show much interest in the question of what types of films can achieve commercial success outside of the province. This may be partly due to his focus on defending Quebec cinema's status as a national cinema, but also because, with the exception of *Le déclin de l'empire américain* and *Jésus de Montréal*, there were not any border-crossing French-language Quebec films to talk about at the time.²² The increasing visibility of "auteur" films that achieve box office success in Quebec and at least some international distribution, a phenomenon that relatively little has been written about, can be seen as a marker of how Quebec cinema has since matured.

While Stephen Crofts does not offer an equivalent to Marshall's concept of commercial-friendly auteur cinema, he does theorize an analytical framework that identifies types of national cinemas that in some ways fills the gaps in Marshall's typology.²³ White has

²⁰ Marshall, *Quebec National Cinema*, 176. Marshall points to Denys Arcand and, less convincingly, Jean Beaudin as examples.

²¹ Marshall, 15.

²² Marshall, 176. Marshall does say the logical extension of an international commercial strategy is to shoot films in English, and several English-language films made in Quebec did achieve international commercial success during this period. However, not being French-language films, they fall outside of his definition of Quebec cinema.

²³ Stephen Crofts, "Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s," in *Film and Nationalism*, ed. Alan Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 27. Crofts' categories of national cinema are: 1) European-style art cinema; 2) Third cinema; 3) Cinema intended solely for local

criticized Crofts' model for "boiling down each national cinema to a sustained set of formal and thematic concerns," inevitably leading to essentialist pigeonholing that radically distorts the realities of those cinemas.²⁴ White cites a number of national cinemas (Indian, South Korean, etc.) that contain almost all of Crofts' categories, suggesting that this renders them inadequate when distinguishing between national cinemas. However, while conceding White's point that national cinemas are never a single unified type, but are inevitably a combination of the types of cinema practices Crofts identifies (European-style art cinema, films intended primarily for local audiences, English-language imitations of Hollywood, etc.), these categories can still be useful in analyzing the types of films that make up a national cinema, as well as in contrasting them with other cinemas that contain a different combination of categories.

Crofts identifies Quebec as the best known example of a regional or ethnic cinema that is a distinctive sub-category of a larger national cinema, in this case Canadian national cinema.²⁵ A weakness in Crofts' concept of Quebec cinema is that while there are important connections between Canada's English- and French-language cinemas, there are also important distinctions. Even in the Quebec film industry's off year of 2012, the meager 4.4% of domestic box office taken by Quebec films was in a different league than the less than 1% Canadian films, including those from Quebec, received in the rest of the country.

An illustration of arguably the key difference between the film industry in Quebec and the rest of Canada is offered by *Louis Cyr*. It earned \$4.1 million at the domestic box office, the most a Quebec film has earned since 2009. But this was nowhere near enough to cover its \$8 million budget, and with little prospect of distribution outside the

markets; 4) Cinemas that "ignore Hollywood" and rely on their own established and substantial distribution networks; 5) English-language cinemas that offer "pallid imitations" of Hollywood; 6) Entirely state-controlled and state-subsidized cinemas; and 7) "Regional or national cinemas whose culture and/or language take their distance from the nation-states which enclose them."

²⁴ White, "National Belonging", 216. To be fair, White slightly distorts Crofts' argument, since Crofts does write that these categories are "highly permeable" and that Indian national cinema, for example, contains three of his categories (Crofts, "Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s," 27).

²⁵ Crofts, "Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s," 38.

province, it is unlikely it ever will.²⁶ However, because of generous government subsidies, the film's producers did not lose money. This suggests that while Quebec funding agencies apparently believe it is a social good for Quebeckers to see themselves on screen, funders in the rest of the country seem to believe that if a film is any good, it should pay for itself.

There are other differences, including the centralization of Quebec's film industry in Montreal, a homegrown star system, and a reliable distribution network which allows for access to cinemas for films deemed commercial. For example, TV crime show spinoff *Omertà* (Luc Dionne, 2012) played on 98 screens across the province, not that many less than most Hollywood imports.²⁷ These all argue for the consideration of Quebec cinema as more than an ethnic subgenre of Canadian cinema. Even in terms of Crofts' typology, it has a very good claim to be considered a national cinema in its own right rather than as a subgenre of Canadian cinema. At the very least, it should be considered the most mature and largest component of a number of cinemas loosely associated under the label "Canadian cinema."

In spite of this weakness, Crofts' typology is useful in describing the types of films made, and not made, in Quebec. Designating the use of French as a defining characteristic of Quebec cinema, which both Marshall, Beard and White and, at least implicitly, Crofts, do, precludes its inclusion among English-language national cinemas (such as English Canada's) that produce low-budget imitations of Hollywood genre films. These films, hoping not so much to compete with Hollywood product as be mistaken for it, are distinguished from both art and populist cinemas by their elimination of indigenous markers of identity, what Crofts calls a "blithe bleaching-out of domestic cultural specificity."²⁸ This categorization highlights a distinction between English Canadian popular cinema, often made with the intent of cracking the U.S. market, and

²⁶ Charles-Henri Ramond, "Entrées en salles des films québécois de 2013," *Films du Québec*, accessed May 5, 2015, <http://www.filmsquebec.com/entrees-en-salles-films-quebécois-2013/> .

²⁷ Ramond, "Page Box Office."

²⁸ Crofts, "Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s," 37.

Quebec popular cinema, which government subsidy allows filmmakers to focus on the small domestic audience.

Quebec produces many examples of European-style art cinema, which Crofts defines as films which do not compete directly with Hollywood, either in domestic cinemas, where they lack popular appeal, or in foreign markets, where they receive limited release on the niche “arthouse” circuit.²⁹ This model seeks to “differentiate itself textually from Hollywood” through formal elements such as psychological characterization, ambiguity and non-linear or fractured narrative. They also assert “national” elements, which qualifies them for state subsidy regardless of commercial prospects, because they are seen as cultural standard bearers.³⁰

Quebec’s art film tradition dates back to the 1960s, and continues with recent critically praised but commercially marginal films such as *Curling* (Denis Côté, 2010), and *En terrains connus* (Stéphane Lafleur, 2011), both of which sold roughly 6,000 tickets in Quebec.³¹ In spite of never coming close to earning back their production budgets, the cultural capital and prestige earned by critical success and festival awards seems to be satisfactory for funding agencies, as the films’ directors received subsidies for later projects.

What Marshall calls mass cinema fits Crofts’ category of local “entertainment cinemas that struggle against Hollywood” in their home markets.³² Like art films, these productions emphasize local qualities, but unlike them, they are genre-oriented and populist. They are non-exportable, because they don’t fit the festival and arthouse circuit model. That is, a film like *Curling* may have local references incomprehensible to foreign audiences, but can still be appreciated by them for its formal qualities. However, the local references that make films attractive in their own market are packaged in

²⁹ Crofts, 27-28.

³⁰ Crofts, 28.

³¹ Ramond, “Page Box Office.”

³² Crofts, “Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s,” 27.

Hollywood-type narratives, but made for a fraction of a typical Hollywood budget and featuring performers who are local “stars,” but virtually unknown outside the province.

These films are the mainstay of Quebec’s French-language industry. Among the most popular are lowbrow comedies like *De père en flic* (Émile Gaudreault, 2009), the durably popular *Les Boys* series of hockey comedies (five films and counting, plus a TV series, between 1997 and 2013) and, of course, *Bon Cop Bad Cop*. There are also spin-offs of popular TV series like *Omertà*, seedy action thrillers like *Nitro* (Alain Desrochers, 2007) and torn-from-the-local-headlines docudramas such as *Piché: entre ciel et terre* (Sylvain Archambault, 2010). A notable recent trend is the series of biopics of iconic Quebec figures, including *Maurice Richard* (Charles Binamé, 2005), Alys Robi (in *Ma vie en cinémascope* [Denise Filiatrault, 2004]), and 2013’s hit *Louis Cyr*. There are also remakes of 1940s rural melodramas such as *Séraphin: Un homme et son péché* (Charles Binamé, 2002) and *Aurore* (Luc Dionne, 2005) which, like many of the biopics, show an odd nostalgia for a time of hardship and struggle, often expressed through the physical suffering of the protagonists, perhaps because the need for social cohesion and, by implication, Quebec independence, seems more clearcut in these contexts.³³ These films compete directly against product from Hollywood in Quebec cinemas, and while they usually do less well than the bigger budgeted imports, they do a better job than many local industries of holding a share of their domestic audience.

Both Crofts and Marshall suggest that a characteristic of art cinema is the presence of formal experimentation or narrative ambiguity to distinguish it from Hollywood cinema. However, this exposes a gap in their typologies. For example, while Arcand is rarely formally innovative, his films clearly have higher ambitions than, say, the *Les Boys* series or *Aurore*. Other Quebec films that seem to fall into this niche include *La grande séduction* (2003, Jean-François Pouliot), *Un dimanche à Kigali* (Robert Favreau, 2006), *Incendies* (2010, Denis Villeneuve), *Starbuck* (Ken Scott, 2011), *Inch’Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012) and *Monsieur Lazhar*. Like Arcand’s work, these films are

³³ Liz Czach, “The Quebec Heritage Film.” Paper presented at SCMS 2015, Montreal, QC, March 29, 2015.

less reliant on crowd pleasing formula elements such as familiar genre tropes, archetypal characters, subject matter lifted from the tabloids, local references (including jokes incomprehensible to non-Quebeckers), action sequences and pratfall humour, but also tend to lack the narrative ambiguity and stylistic experiments associated with art films. This is not to say these elements are always absent, even in Arcand's work, only that these films do not comfortably fit into the categories of either art or populist cinema as defined by Marshall and Crofts. The fact that there are an increasing number of films like this being produced in Quebec, and that these films might have a far greater chance of tapping into a wider audience outside of the province than is possible for films confined to the arthouse and festival circuit, or those films simply deemed unexportable, argues for a more nuanced typology when describing the Quebec film industry.

Denys Arcand as Auteur

One way of developing this more nuanced typology is to examine in depth the evolution of the way Arcand's films have fared internationally. Because his films are in French, they tended to be "recycled" by distributors, transformed from popular-art hybrids into straightforward art cinema when they crossed into the U.S. market, a fate typical of non-English language films searching for an American audience. For example, when *Le déclin de l'empire américain* was released in 1986, it won the FIPRESCI Prize at Cannes and the People's Choice Award (and Best Canadian Film prize) at Toronto. In Quebec, it ran for a full year and not only broke the record for box office takings by a local film previously held by *Deux femmes en or* (Claude Fournier, 1970), it even passed *E.T.* (Stephen Spielberg, 1982) as the most popular draw in Quebec history up to that time.³⁴ The film also earned \$1 million in the rest of Canada, a record for a Quebec film until it was broken by Arcand's *Jésus de Montréal* in 1989.³⁵ In France, it was one of the top five box office draws of 1987, earning \$10 million and becoming a cult film, running continuously in one Paris cinema until 1993.³⁶ In the United States, it was picked up by the independent distributor Cineplex Odeon and had an eighteen-

³⁴ André Loiselle, *Denys Arcand's Le déclin de l'empire américain and Les invasions barbares* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 25.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Loiselle, *Denys Arcand's Le déclin de l'empire américain and Les invasions barbares*, 26.

week run during which it received excellent reviews and became the first Canadian film nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar.³⁷ It played on up to a maximum of thirteen screens in the U.S. and earned \$1.1 million.³⁸ Yet compare this to *Porky's* (Bob Clark, 1981), an English-Canadian comedy that perfectly fits Crofts' definition of a pallid imitation of Hollywood product, which had a twenty-four week run and reached a distribution peak of 1,605 screens across the U.S.³⁹ In France, *Le déclin* had been a mainstream hit, but in the U.S. it was clearly confined to the arthouse circuit.

Arcand's next film, *Jésus de Montréal*, won the Jury and Ecumenical Prizes at Cannes and had successful runs in Quebec and the rest of Canada, becoming the first Quebec film to be picked up by a major U.S. distributor, Orion Classics.⁴⁰ Like *Le déclin*, it received excellent reviews and an Oscar nomination. Even so, its exposure peaked at twenty-one screens,⁴¹ and while its \$1.6 million gross was excellent for an arthouse release, it still could not be described as the mainstream hit it was in Canada and France.⁴²

Les invasions barbares had a slightly different trajectory. It made over \$5 million in Quebec and won prizes for director and actress at Cannes. It earned another \$7.9 million in France,⁴³ where it became the only Canadian film to win the César (France's equivalent of the Oscar) for Best Film. It then topped this by becoming the only Canadian film to win the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. Distributed by Miramax, it broke out of the arthouse ghetto and reached a release peak of 134 screens while earning \$3.5 million in an 18 week run. This is, of course, a fraction of the screens taken

³⁷ *Le déclin de l'empire américain*, *Jésus de Montréal* and *Les invasions barbares* were the first three Canadian films to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

³⁸ Bernard Bérubé and Richard Magnan, "La distribution des films québécois aux États-Unis," *Cinémas 7.3* (1997): 46-48.

³⁹ Bérubé and Magnan, "La distribution des films québécois aux États-Unis," 38; "Porky's," *Box Office Mojo*, accessed August 5, 2015, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=porkys.htm>.

⁴⁰ Bérubé and Magnan, "La distribution des films québécois," 36.

⁴¹ "Jesus of Montreal," *Box Office Mojo*, accessed April 26, 2014, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=jesusofmontreal.htm>.

⁴² Bérubé and Magnan, "La distribution des films québécois," 47.

⁴³ "Les invasions barbares," *Box Office Mojo*, accessed April 25, 2014, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&id=lesinvasionsbarbares.htm>.

by a major studio blockbuster release, and well short even of *Porky's*. Its release pattern was more similar to that of *Once* (John Carney, 2006), the Oscar-winning independent Irish film that peaked at 150 screens.⁴⁴ This was still a much wider release than Arcand's earlier films had received.

This pattern has found a recent echo, with *Incendies* being picked up by Sony Classics in 2010 and reaching 90 screens in the U.S., while Music Box Films distributed *Monsieur Lazhar* the following year to 86 screens. Both films snagged Oscar nominations and earned over \$2 million in the U.S.⁴⁵ While these are hardly blockbuster figures, the breadth of distribution suggests these films have gone beyond the arthouse circuit and are competing, if not in the mainstream U.S. film market, at least with the better known independent domestic films.

The local cultural markers that Crofts claims are characteristic of both art and populist cinema are present in these recent Quebec films, which have strong political resonances in the province. However, they are largely contextual. That is, unlike a film such as *Maurice Richard*, whose narrative almost entirely consists of culturally specific sports and political references, the narratives of films like *Les invasions barbares*, *La grande séduction*, *Incendies* and *Monsieur Lazhar* are more universal and abstract, and their political meanings arise largely through the knowledge that the spectator brings to the cinema of the social and cultural context in which they were made. This paradox is particularly interesting in the case of Denys Arcand, whose films have specific, and often very controversial, meanings in Quebec which often sail over the heads of audiences outside of the province.

Although Arcand would make any reasonable list of Quebec auteurs, he is not an auteur in the original sense of an artist who has produced a body of work with a consistent

⁴⁴ "Once," *Box Office Mojo*, accessed April 25, 2014, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=once.htm>.

⁴⁵ *Incendies*," *Box Office Mojo*, accessed April 25, 2014, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=incendies.htm>; "Monsieur Lazhar," *Box Office Mojo*, accessed April 25, 2014, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&id=monsieurlazhar.htm>.

visual style and uses his control of *mise-en-scène* to express his worldview. His films tend to look quite different from each other, making it difficult to describe him as a visual stylist. However, it is possible to trace some visual characteristics, particularly in his contrasting treatment of Quebec's urban and rural landscapes. While his work from the 1970s tends to look a little rougher than his later films, arguably a matter of budget and experience as much as anything else, Arcand's urban landscapes throughout tend to be anonymous and unmemorable. The few occasions when they are not, as in the view from the office of the lawyer-Satanic tempter in *Jésus de Montréal* or the reinvention of the Olympic Stadium as bureaucratic hell in *L'âge des ténèbres* (2007), the intention is either negative or satiric. On the other hand, it is possible to relate his increasingly gorgeously photographed and romanticized portrayals of Quebec's countryside, climaxing with Rémy's death in *Les invasions barbares* and Jean-Marc's epiphany in *L'âge des ténèbres*, to his increasingly pessimistic view of the Quebec constructed by its urban elite.

A stronger claim for Arcand as an auteur is based on his role as writer or co-writer on many of his projects, for he often returns to the same ideas and themes. This is particularly true of a series of films beginning with the documentary *Le confort et l'indifférence* (1981) that engage directly with the question of Quebec independence, and take on semi-autobiographical meanings as they specifically deal with the failure of Arcand's generation to achieve its historical project and the consequences of this for the province. What makes this cycle of films particularly interesting in this discussion is Arcand's use of the failure to achieve independence as a structuring absence that informs all the actions portrayed. It is this means of engagement with the issue that makes his films both intensely local and politically specific on one hand, but simultaneously universal and abstract enough on the other to make them exportable worldwide in a way that was unique, but has since been followed by a handful of films, with potential for more in the future.

While it is possible to find recurring themes and ideas running through all of Arcand's films, even those he did not write, this discussion is specifically concerned with *Le*

déclin de l'empire américain, *Jésus de Montréal*, *Vue d'ailleurs* (1991), *Les invasions barbares* and *L'âge des ténèbres*, as they are the films that present an evolving portrait of Arcand's own class and generation, leaders of Quebec society who abandoned Roman Catholicism for the new religion of nationalism, only to find themselves lost and bewildered in the aftermath of the failed 1980 referendum, and sketches out the consequences for the province of his generation's failings. This discussion will touch on some of Arcand's earlier films to the extent that they engage with subject matter which becomes centrally important in his post-referendum cycle. However, this excludes consideration of the post-1980 films *Le crime d'Ovide Plouffe* (1984) and *Joyeux calvaire* (1996) because they lack the autobiographical flavour that comes with Arcand's focus on bourgeois boomers like himself, and the English-language films *Love and Human Remains* (1993) and *Stardom*, which fall out of the conversation not only for that reason, but also because their use of English removes the language barrier that affects international distribution of French-language films and, beyond that, leaves them outside this essay's definition of Quebec national cinema.

Because of the generational and autobiographical aspect of Arcand's referendum films, some biographical and historical information is useful in understanding his work. Arcand was born in 1941, and raised at a time when Quebec was immersed in a deeply conservative ethos built around a defensive nationalism. The passive acceptance of injustice and exploitation as long as it allowed for the survival of Roman Catholic and French-speaking Quebecers as a people is an idea that Arcand has treated as central to the province's character. This reactionary ideology found expression in a handful of Quebec films made during the late 1940s and early 1950s, notably *La petite Aurore*, *l'enfant martyre* (Jean-Yves Bigras, 1952) and *Un homme et son péché* (Paul Gury, 1949), popular low-budget tales of rural suffering endured stoically in the hope of a better life in the next world.

Arcand's generation, particularly urban intellectuals like himself, was very much identified with the Quiet Revolution, a secularization of society which followed the election of a Liberal government in Quebec in 1960 after a long spell of conservative

rule. Having rejected the reactionary mores of the Roman Catholic Church and the defensive nationalism associated with it, many members of Arcand's generation embraced both leftist politics and a more assertive articulation of Quebec Francophone identity which between them they believed would leave Quebec less open to the economic exploitation that they claimed characterized the province before 1960. This new type of nationalism would come to embrace, in many cases, the goal of making Quebec an independent country. This goal was shared by Arcand and several of his fellow filmmakers at the federally funded National Film Board of Canada (NFB), where he began working in the early 1960s.

After spending several years "practicing" filmmaking on NFB documentaries whose content he did not control, Arcand was finally promised free rein on a documentary about Quebec's textile industry.⁴⁶ The title of *On est au coton* (1970-1976), literally translated, refers to the cotton used in textile mills; it is also a colloquial expression meaning "We're fed up!" However, while the textile industry at that time had among the worst paid workers and most miserable working conditions in the province, the documentary subjects were not nearly as fed up as the people filming them.⁴⁷ The result was less a leftist analysis of capitalist exploitation than an attack on the baffling passivity of Quebec's workers who declined to take up their part in the class struggle. The film was one of several at that time that ran into trouble with NFB management, who shelved it and only released an edited version in 1976, six years after it was finished, while a restored version was not publicly screened until 1994.⁴⁸

After making one more documentary, Arcand left the NFB and made a trio of films that used genre tropes to critique Quebec society. The first of these, *La maudite galette* (1972), which can be roughly translated as "dirty loot," was a crime thriller about a lowlife couple who decide to rob their rich uncle with disastrous consequences that

⁴⁶ Pierre Véronneau, "Alone and with Others, Denys Arcand's Destiny within the Quebec Cinematic and Cultural Context," *Auteur/Provocateur: The Films of Denys Arcand*. Ed. André Loisel and Brian McIlroy (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 14.

⁴⁷ Véronneau, "Alone and with Others," 15. As Pierre Véronneau writes, Arcand ended up "making a film, not about rebellion, but about resignation" (15).

⁴⁸ Loisel, *Denys Arcand's Le déclin de l'empire américain and Les invasions barbares*, 5.

offered a sour commentary on materialism in Quebec society. As André Loiselle and Brian McIlroy point out, the film “divides the working class into parallel sub-classes that prey on one another but never envision the possibility of uniting against an extra-diegetic common enemy.”⁴⁹ Arcand followed this with *Réjeanne Padovani* (1973), a topical exposé of political corruption in Montreal inspired by Suetonius’ account of the decay of the Roman Empire, in which he mischievously cast lookalikes of then Montreal Mayor Jean Drapeau and then Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa in key roles. As politicians, businessmen and Mafia types party into the night, the only sympathetic character (Luce Guilbeault in the title role as the ex-wife of a corrupt building contractor) is taken away and murdered. The attack on a decadent materialist society with no counterbalance except a soon-to-be-murdered woman and a handful of ineffective leftist protestors is even more downbeat than his previous work. Pierre Véronneau writes about this film that “Arcand exposes many things that should upset the spectator – corruption, crime, etc – but since, as he sees it, there really is no class struggle in Quebec, only exploiters and exploitees happy with their fate, there is no point in trying to change it. It is a politicized cinema minus the militant dimension.”⁵⁰ His next film, *Gina* (1975), is a rape-revenge story which features a film crew giving up their leftist documentary on exploited workers in order to make something more commercial, a stripper (the title character) gang raped by locals in snowmobile outfits to the tune of “O Canada” on a motel television, and a gangster’s gruesome revenge on the rapists. Critics were horrified, and the film was unfairly dismissed as a nihilist dead end whose unpopularity prevented Arcand from directing again for several years.

Arcand’s next realized project as director was *Le confort et l’indifférence*, a documentary examining the 1980 referendum on Quebec sovereignty. Arcand was a supporter of Quebec independence, and the electorate’s decisive rejection of the watered down option of sovereignty-association was a profound shock.⁵¹ In his film, Arcand offered an analysis, inspired by Machiavelli, which attributed the referendum

⁴⁹ André Loiselle and Brian McIlroy, “Introduction,” *Auteur/Provocateur: The Films of Denys Arcand*. Ed. André Loiselle et al. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 3.

⁵⁰ Pierre Véronneau, “Alone and with Others,” 19.

⁵¹ Véronneau, 21.

defeat to Quebeckers' addiction to "comfort" (materialism) and "indifference" (apathy, or perhaps passivity). Arcand argued that Quebeckers were "spoiled by the crumbs of American wealth," and would therefore "never take the risk of losing whatever little they have in order to achieve some distant promise of freedom."⁵² Some sovereignists have pronounced the film "brilliant,"⁵³ but nationalist intellectual and political commentator Lise Bissonnette wrote a scorching critique, calling it "an insulting film by intellectuals against the little people who voted NO" and claiming that Arcand "says to the people that they are stupid and cowardly and makes himself appear courageous for saying it."⁵⁴

Whatever its shortcomings, *Le confort* is key to understanding Arcand's later work. In a 1982 interview, Arcand told *Le Devoir*: "I don't have dreams and I don't know many people who do. I don't see a dream for Quebec anymore."⁵⁵ For Arcand, the referendum loss killed the dream of a generation. He would soon be examining what a society without dreams looks like.

Arcand's Post-Referendum Film Cycle

Le déclin de l'empire américain is the definitive portrait of post-referendum Quebec, chronicling the disengagement from politics of Arcand's generation and its embrace of hedonism. There is no mention of the referendum, but this is a structuring absence that informs everything that takes place. Arcand once told an interviewer that "In Canada, nothing ever happens. Canada has always been on the margin of everything."⁵⁶ For Arcand, Quebeckers had an opportunity to make history in 1980, but instead voted to be Canadian, opting for the material benefits of being an appendage to the U.S. instead of

⁵² Véronneau, 13.

⁵³ Josée Legault, "Movie Says Much About Quebec Today," *The Montreal Gazette*, May 16, 2003, accessed April 23, 2014, <http://www.vigile.net/archives/ds-actu/docs3/03-5-16-1.html#mgjl>.

⁵⁴ Lise Bissonnette, "La vengeance et le mépris," *Le devoir*, January 30, 1982, 12; Lise Bissonnette, "Denys Arcand and 'Le confort et l'indifférence.'" Trans. Ron Burnett. *Ciné-Tracts* 4.4 (1982), 74-76.

⁵⁵ La Rochelle, *Denys Arcand*, 19.

⁵⁶ André Loiselle, "I Only Know Where I Come From, Not Where I'm Going: A Conversation with Denys Arcand," in *Auteur/Provocateur: The Films of Denys Arcand*, ed. André Loiselle et al. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 154.

the certain risks and hypothetical rewards that might come with independence. As Loïselle argues:

“[t]hese characters are rich and comfortable because they benefit from the wealth of America – they live ‘off the crumbs of the American table.’ Quebecers, like the rest of Canadians, are to Americans what the Etruscans were to the Romans: a marginal parasitic nation that could profit from the wealth of the neighbouring empire.”⁵⁷

This sense of choosing to be peripheral to history is reinforced by the film’s idea that when empires decay, the rot begins at the extremities.

A closer analysis of *Le déclin* reveals how precise a portrait Arcand provides of post-referendum Quebec. The film opens with a history professor explaining her theory that in virile societies people are willing to make sacrifices and defer happiness for the common good. Individual gratification only becomes a priority when a society begins to fail; therefore personal happiness is inevitably linked to decline. Again, nobody in the film brings up the question of Quebec sovereignty, but, as Loïselle writes, “[t]he pulverization of the dominant nationalist narrative triggered a multiplicity of other priorities among the population of Quebec, including a great fervor for personal ‘comfort.’”⁵⁸ Quebec audiences in 1986 would have had no trouble coming up with an example of a society that had given up a collective dream and was now focusing on individual desires.

Yet while the film has fun with its characters’ sexual activities, Arcand has described hedonism as “a dead end” that “leads nowhere.”⁵⁹ For all their incessant talk of sex, the characters seem to get relatively little pleasure from it, and require ever more extreme behaviour to achieve a sexual frisson, from sleeping with each other’s partners to attending swinger’s clubs for sex with strangers to sado-masochistic whipping, the last an intriguing echo of a scene of a nun whipping herself Arcand was forced to cut from his 1965 documentary *Ville-Marie*. If nationalism had replaced religion in 1960s and 70’s Quebec, then hedonism had now replaced nationalism, with similarly unfulfilling results.

⁵⁷ Loïselle, *Denys Arcand’s Le déclin de l’empire américain and Les invasions barbares*, 20.

⁵⁸ Loïselle, 66.

⁵⁹ Loïselle, “I Only Know Where I Come From, Not Where I’m Going,” 154.

This is the source of what Bart Testa calls the “corrosive bitterness veiled so poorly in the comedy,”⁶⁰ and the absence of any talk of the future. Beneath its bright chatter, the film is deeply sad and pessimistic.

Le déclin de l'empire américain was clearly Arcand's most ambitious film to that point, and it breaks from his previous work in ways that made it more exportable. While Arcand's earlier films had been grim stories spiced with flashes of black humour, *Le déclin* was, despite its underlying gloominess, often very funny. And it was funny about a universal subject, sex and male-female relations. Instead of Arcand's usual alienated lumpenproletarians, the characters were now bourgeois types, much like Arcand himself. While their portrayal is hardly uncritical, they are far more witty and charming than any he had presented before. In addition, the actors spoke standard French rather than *joual* (an urban, primarily working class, French slang unique to Quebec), which since the 1960s had been the dominant mode in Quebec films as a conscious attempt by artists to create and assert a distinct Quebec identity.⁶¹ But Arcand knew these bourgeois intellectuals would not be speaking *joual*. A consequence of this use of standard French is that it removed a distancing language barrier and allowed the film to be more easily received by audiences in France.⁶²

French critics welcomed *Le déclin* as a witty, upscale sex comedy in the manner of Eric Rohmer or Woody Allen.⁶³ There were also comparisons to *The Big Chill* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1983), with Arcand's sharp-eyed and downbeat assessment of a generation who failed to complete its generational project transformed, outside of its original context, into a more generalized narrative of baby boomers who have traded their 60's idealism for consumerism. According to Denis Bachand, this was central to the film's

⁶⁰ Bart Testa, “Arcand's Double-Twist Allegory: *Jesus of Montreal*,” in *Auteur/Provocateur: The Films of Denys Arcand*, ed. André Loiselle et al. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 103.

⁶¹ Loiselle, *Denys Arcand's Le déclin de l'empire américain and Les invasions barbares*, 19.

⁶² Loiselle, 20.

⁶³ Denis Bachand, “Entre l'écho des voisins et celui des cousins: Les voix croisées de la réception critique des films de Denys Arcand aux États-Unis et en France,” *Cinéma* 7.3 (1997), 124.

success in the U.S.⁶⁴ However, while *The Big Chill* included specific references to the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War, the restricting of Quebec's political context to a structuring absence allowed Arcand's film to become akin to a blank screen upon which international viewers could project their own histories.

Critics in France and the U.S. responded differently to the film. In France, it was received as an example of what Crofts calls the "European commercial film," which mixes elements of the art and populist films to compete in domestic markets against Hollywood, but may turn up, depoliticized and stripped of its cultural specificity, in the U.S. as an art film.⁶⁵ This does not quite describe *Le déclin*, since the cultural signifiers Crofts claims are central to both art and populist cinema are absent. That is, while Arcand's film is very politically and culturally specific, it crosses borders because these specificities are invisible to those unaware of the context in which it was made. In the U.S., it was received as a European-style art film, having both the whiff of sex and generalized humanism that Crofts claims gives them their appeal, but the language barrier (overcome, in the case of France) still confined it to the arthouse circuit.⁶⁶

There was some confusion among U.S. critics about the title, with Stanley Kauffman asking in *The New Republic* why it wasn't called "The Decline of the North American Empire," since it was made in Canada.⁶⁷ Peter Wilkins explains this response from Kauffman and a number of other critics by suggesting that "Americans do not see themselves as having any imperial control over Canada" and "have difficulty seeing how this group of French-Canadian academics participates in the American empire."⁶⁸ The film's politics were in this sense obscure enough to American audiences that even as normally astute a critic as J. Hoberman of *The Village Voice* could claim that the film

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Crofts, "Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s," 39-40.

⁶⁶ Bachand, "Entre l'écho des voisins et celui des cousins," 124.

⁶⁷ Peter Wilkins, "No Big Picture: Arcand and His U.S. Critics," in *Auteur/Provocateur: The Films of Denys Arcand*, Ed. André Loiselle and Brian McIlroy (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 113.

⁶⁸ Wilkins, "No Big Picture," 116-117.

was “so de-natured it might have been produced anywhere.”⁶⁹ Clearly, the film was comprehensible enough on a surface level to be enjoyed by anybody, but just as clearly not in the same way as it is in Quebec.

Arcand’s next film, *Jésus de Montréal*, dealt with a charismatic actor who returns to Montreal to stage the Passion of Christ, and gathers a troupe of followers whose unorthodox production challenges and offends Church authorities in ways that echo the Gospels. Although on the surface it seems a religious allegory that satirizes contemporary society, Testa argues this is “naïve” since Arcand “has persistently subjected religion, and Catholicism in particular, to mockery and derision.”⁷⁰ Testa agrees with Loiselle and McIlroy, who identify the narrative’s central conflict as between artists, led by the Christ-like actor Daniel, and corruptors of art, led by Father Leclerc (the priest who originally commissions the production).⁷¹

Without denying that the elements Testa, Loiselle and McIlroy ascribe to the film are present, there is another, more culturally specific reading. The Quebec presented in this film is essentially the same as that of *Le déclin*: without ideals or history, and consumed by hedonism and materialism. Returning from an extended period abroad, Daniel finds his former comrades dispersed and demoralized. Again, while the 1980 referendum is never mentioned, it remains a structuring absence, as the loss of idealism in society mirrors the situation in *Le déclin*. His rekindling of their dreams and the enthusiastic response he receives is not an answer to the question “What would happen if Christ returned?”; rather, it answers the question what would happen if the 1980 referendum was rerun. The answer is provided in the conversation between Daniel and Father Leclerc. Although sympathetic, Leclerc will not risk his Church sinecure to support Daniel’s production. That is, he rejects Daniel’s vision in exactly the same terms as Arcand ascribes to the No voters in *Le confort et l’indifférence*. The subsequent events, with Daniel literally crushed under a giant crucifix, is an allegorical replay of the 1980 referendum, or at least Arcand’s vision of it. The coda, in which some of the actors are

⁶⁹ Wilkins, 119.

⁷⁰ Testa, “Arcand’s Double-Twist Allegory,” 91.

⁷¹ Loiselle and McIlroy, “Introduction,” 5.

co-opted by the establishment to found a theatre in Daniel's name, but implicitly lacking his idealism, is on one level a reference to the Catholic Church, but, on another, a sardonic jab at the Parti Québécois, the nationalist political party which had remained in power after losing the 1980 referendum by promising "good government" and deferring the question of Quebec independence, theoretically its *raison d'être*.

According to Bachand, most U.S. critics treated the film as a religious allegory or a generalized social critique.⁷² For example, Roger Ebert praised it as "an original and uncompromising attempt to explore what really might happen, if the spirit of Jesus were to walk among us in these timid and materialistic times."⁷³ Not knowing about Arcand and his generation's history of anti-clericalism or Quebec's post-referendum political context made it seem natural for U.S. critics to look at the story's universal aspects. However, perhaps Arcand wasn't trying to be universal at all. As Peter Wilkins writes, "[t]his Jesus is specifically located in Montreal, immediately creating a tension between Christ's supposed universality as the savior of humanity and the particularity of a city in Canada. The U.S. critics avoid the question of this particularity."⁷⁴ It is, in fact, the very invisibility of this particularity that made the film exportable to the U.S.

Vue d'ailleurs, a short film Arcand directed as part of the compendium film *Montreal vu par . . .* (1991), is a sort of companion piece to *Jésus de Montréal*. While Arcand's naming his film *Jésus de Montréal* deliberately limited its universality, it also carried the implicit assumption that Montreal was as far from the seat of real power in today's world as Nazareth or Jerusalem was from Rome during biblical times. *Vue d'ailleurs*, which can be roughly translated as "view from abroad," picks up on this by presenting a couple who recall their diplomatic posting in Montreal years earlier and relate an anecdote of them making love on a Westmount lawn and climaxing just as an FLQ⁷⁵ bomb explodes

⁷² Bachand, "Entre l'écho des voisins et celui des cousins," 125-129.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Wilkins, "No Big Picture," 123.

⁷⁵ The Front de libération du Québec, or Quebec Liberation Front, was a Montreal-based urban terrorist group that advocated Quebec independence. Members carried out a series of bombings during the 1960s, and their activities climaxed with the events of the October Crisis in 1970.

nearby. A droll, iconoclastic retelling of the FLQ years as a fondly remembered sexual anecdote that took place in a charming backwater, the couple's inability to recall what the letters FLQ stood for reinforced how inconsequential the storms and alarms of Quebec might seem from an outsider's perspective.

During the 1990s, Arcand made three feature films, including two in English, but it was not until 2003 that he returned to his cycle of films about the state of Quebec and his generation with *Les invasions barbares*. In the 13 years since *Vue d'ailleurs*, there had been a shift in Quebec culture. The narrow defeat of the sovereignty option in a second referendum in 1995 had been followed by a wave of nostalgia in the province's literature, music and cinema. As Loiselle argues, "nostalgia and a fixation on ancestral roots have become the dominant ethos in the province since the 1990s. Finding the lost father seems to have become a central metaphor for the Québécois search for an identity anchored in the past."⁷⁶ Films that reflect this partial rehabilitation of the era before 1960, which had typically been labeled *la grande noirceur* ("great darkness"), include nostalgic biographies of Maurice Richard, Alys Robi and Louis Cyr, and extremely popular remakes of notorious reactionary rural dramas *Aurore* and *Séraphin, un homme et son péché*. Most of these also revived the truism that the "real" Quebec was in the regions outside of Montreal. *Les invasions barbares* shares some of the characteristics of these films, particularly in its father-son generational reconciliation and in the father's decision to return to the countryside to die.

However, *Les invasions barbares* is significantly less nostalgic than other films of this period, since it portrays the characters from *Le déclin* that it now revisits after seventeen years as a failed generation. The ultimately sentimental reuniting of friends and reconciliation of generations that are the film's main concerns suggest that Arcand's generation is not only condemned, but also forgiven. In a key scene, the old friends pass around a joint while reminiscing over the foolish ideologies they followed when they were young, from Maoism to post-structuralism . . . to Quebec independence. Arcand has revised the analysis he provided in *Le confort et l'indifférence*; he now

⁷⁶ Loiselle, *Denys Arcand's Le déclin de l'empire américain and Les invasions barbares*, 150.

points the finger of blame at the generation of bourgeois intellectuals who failed, not because (or at least not solely because) of the addiction to materialism and passivity of the masses, but because those belonging to his class and generation lacked true conviction. This scathing condemnation is, however, accompanied by a rueful forgiveness. Arcand has said that “while Canada might not have a very exciting history, there is a sense of peacefulness and serenity here; an immanent happiness that no one ‘talks’ about, but that is communicated through images of the landscape, of nature, of the beautiful houses that the characters inhabit. It is also in the friendship that unites these people.”⁷⁷ Despite their failings, the dying Rémy and his friends had reconciled themselves with their weaknesses and given up the pointless hedonism that was the focus of *Le déclin*, instead finding solace in life’s small, quotidian pleasures: good food, fine wine, the glory of nature, the ties of family and friendship.

This does not mean Arcand excuses them entirely. The legacy of their failure is a wrecked society with a health system in shambles, corrupt unions, an incompetent bureaucracy and ineffectual police. By failing to achieve independence for Quebec, Rémy (and Arcand) and his friends’ generation left the province open to the forces of globalization and everybody with any talent or spirit has left. Rémy’s son is an international financier living in Europe, while his daughter spends her life on the high seas, delivering yachts. The American empire has continued to decline, and the barbarians, having overrun peripheries like Quebec, now strike at the heart of the empire, which is how the 9/11 attacks (which occurred during the filming of *Les invasions barbares*) are described. In *Le déclin*, there was no talk of the future. There is some talk of the future here, but only for those who leave. As Loiselle writes, “Rémy’s death is nothing less than an analogy for the death of Quebec.”⁷⁸

The film’s political implications were clear to Quebec audiences. Sovereignist pundit Josée Legault, while disputing its conclusions, considered it an accurate portrayal of Quebec’s narcissistic elites in the aftermath of the 1995 referendum. She describes the

⁷⁷ Loiselle, “I Only Know Where I Come From, Not Where I’m Going,” 154.

⁷⁸ Loiselle, *Denys Arcand’s Le déclin de l’empire américain and Les invasions barbares*, 89.

film as a portrait of those “francophone, Quebec baby boomers who control most of the levers of political and economic power here,” who “used to dream of an independent Quebec but now look at it as either a lost battle, a danger to their material well-being, or simply too much trouble to achieve.”⁷⁹ Significantly, this is achieved with only one brief mention of sovereignty, again relying on the contextual knowledge of the domestic audience to provide the political resonance.

Once again, this political dimension disappears when it crosses borders. For example, the *New York Times*' A.O. Scott assumed the title was a straightforward reference to 9/11 and the film a humanist tale about generational reconciliation involving ex-radical baby boomers and their Reaganite offspring.⁸⁰ This was true of European reaction too: where Arcand considers *Les invasions barbares* a “sad film,” it was celebrated at Cannes as “hopeful.”⁸¹ This type of reception by foreign audiences is shared by *Monsieur Lazhar*, whose political implications would be unnoticeable to anyone not following Quebec's debate over the “reasonable accommodation” of immigrants. The use of an elliptical rather than explicit approach to political and cultural questions may be an avenue future Quebec productions will take to gain international audiences.

L'âge de ténèbres, the final film of Arcand's generational cycle, acts as a bitter coda. Quebec is even more of a shambles. The protagonist, Jean-Marc, is a baby boomer turned ineffectual bureaucrat. “When I was young,” he says, “I marched for independence. Now I shuffle papers.” On his journey through contemporary Montreal, Jean-Marc finds a people who, like him, are without hopes or dreams and retreat into fantasy, despair or mindless consumerism. Arcand's solution is to have Jean-Marc return to the countryside, where he finds solace and rejuvenation through contact with his ancestral soil and, in the final scene, experiences a moment of transcendent happiness through the simple act of peeling an apple. This mixture of bitter attacks on

⁷⁹ Legault, “Movie Says Much About Quebec Today.”

⁸⁰ A.O. Scott, “The Barbarian Invasions,” *New York Times*, October 17, 2003, accessed April 27, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9F01E6DF143EF934A25753C1A9659C8B63>.

⁸¹ Loiselle, *Denys Arcand's Le déclin de l'empire américain and Les invasions barbares*, 252.

contemporary society and simplistic conservative retreat was an unexpected turn for Arcand that was unpopular in Quebec and barely released outside the province.

Arcand's most recent film, *Le règne de la beauté* (2014), picks up on some of the themes that characterized his generational cycle. The protagonist is Luc (Éric Bruneau), an architect whose talent and ambition, like that of the "barbarian" financier son played by Stéphane Rousseau in *Les invasions barbares*, is too large for the backwater Quebec has become. While the province's urban spaces continue to get short shrift (Quebec City is portrayed as an incestuous small town where Luc's attempts to have an adulterous fling are complicated by his inability to go anywhere without being recognized), the beautifully photographed countryside is no longer idealized. It is instead identified with Luc's lovely but mentally unstable wife, a former athlete who lacked the talent, unlike Luc, to attain world-class level. The film's version of Quebec may be beautiful, but it can only hold him back or even drag him down. As the film's flashback structure shows Luc in the future as a famous architect accepting a prestigious international award and married to a Spaniard, it does not suggest that Arcand's view that there is no place in modern Quebec for the ambitious has changed much since *Les invasions barbares*. The film's main novelty is that Arcand abandons his own generation to introduce a set of younger characters, only to reveal that he doesn't find this younger generation very interesting or sympathetic, and does not seem to have much to say about them either. *Le règne de la beauté* sold just over 40,000 tickets in Quebec, earning roughly \$300,000 in box office receipts, far short of its \$7.5 million budget, with little in the way of distribution outside the province to make up the difference.⁸² The good news for Arcand is that, if the province's current financing practices continue, the international prestige he has earned over his career should make it possible to gain financing for his next one.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have been less concerned with justifying the status of Quebec's film industry as a national cinema through the identification of consistent themes than by

⁸² Ramond, "Page box office."

pointing to the simple fact that it is producing a body of films which are consumed by audiences in a way that is clearly distinct from the rest of Canada. Much of this difference comes down to funding policies. In Quebec, a film is deemed successful by funding bodies if it earns critical recognition and international prestige, or if it draws a domestic audience, even if in neither case it comes close to covering its production costs. How else to explain the ability of talented auteurs like Denis Côté to receive financing for his projects despite negligible box office support?⁸³ Similarly, unpretentious Quebec crowd pleasers like *Louis Cyr* or *Omertà* are considered “hits” even if their box office receipts fall far short of their production budgets and their cultural specificity and lack of formal experimentation preclude earning money in foreign markets to make up the difference. However, in the rest of the country, while there seems to be a limited tolerance for art cinema, popular films are expected to pay for themselves, which explains the focus on breaking into the U.S. market. Compare, for instance, the reception of *Louis Cyr* to *Men with Brooms* (Paul Gross, 2002), which in many ways is simply an English-language reworking of *Les Boys*. Paul Gross’ curling comedy earned \$4.2 million in Canadian theatres, making it one of the most popular Canadian films ever in English Canada, but still fell short of earning back its \$7.5 million budget,⁸⁴ and therefore failed to spawn a series of sequels and imitations. Meanwhile, its cultural specificity resulted in little distribution in the United States, where a more generic film (with no curling) might have passed as American and had a chance of making its money back.

My discussion of Denys Arcand’s work is intended to help explain one of the recent developments in Quebec cinema, the growth of what Marshall calls mass-audience-friendly auteur cinema. Beyond the increasing commercial acceptance of Quebec films by Quebec audiences, the increasing importance of these hybrid films which contain elements of both art and populist cinemas is an important element of contemporary

⁸³ Some of Côté’s box office figures: *Elle veut le chaos* (2008) sold 569 tickets, *Carcasses* (2009) sold 649 tickets, *Curling* (2010) sold 6,021 tickets, *Béstiiaire* (2012) sold 488 tickets, *Vic + Flo ont vu un ours* (2013) sold 8,338 tickets (his biggest “hit”), and *Que ta joie demeure* (2014) sold 159 tickets. Ramond, “Page box office.”

⁸⁴ “Men with Brooms,” *The Numbers*. <http://www.the-numbers.com/search?searchterm=men+with+brooms>

Quebec cinema, and seems to be the key to any possibility of expanding distribution into foreign markets, particularly the U.S.

While this is largely due to funding practices which permit Quebec filmmakers to make films intended to attract domestic audiences rather than being forced to depend on distribution in the U.S. to achieve financing, it is also because, following Arcand's lead and using the local political and social context as an implicit structuring absence, a few Quebec filmmakers have, in recent years, made films which are simultaneously intensely local and also legible to international audiences unaware of the domestic contexts central to their reception by Quebec audiences.

There are some obvious limits to this discussion which offer multiple areas for further research. While my essay has adopted an analytical model which isolates French-language Quebec cinema in order to study those distinctive characteristics which define it as a national cinema, it might also be useful to map out the connections with other Canadian cinematic practices which complicate this definition. For this type of study, rather than following Crofts and seeing Quebec cinema as a subset of Canadian national cinema, or with Beard and White, who posit related, but distinct and parallel English- and French-language Canadian cinemas (and possibly a third parallel cinema from First Nations filmmakers), it might be helpful to see these as umbrella terms hosting a variety of overlapping cinema practices not only within English, French and First Nations cinemas, but also between them as well. Even so, within this intertwined network of cinemas, it is impossible not to designate French-language feature filmmaking in Quebec as the most mature and varied element, as well as the one most capable of producing films that have both national specificity and export potential.

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