

VIVE LA DIFFÉRENCE!



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Quebec is an anomaly in North America: it is the only territory where French is the principal language. Eighty per cent of Quebecers "live" in French from the cradle to the grave, study in French schools and universities, work for companies whose main language is French and vote for politicians who address them only in French.

They do not constitute a minority comparable, for example, to Hispanics in Miami or New York. In Quebec, French is not simply the language of a significant social group, it is the language of society: government, institutions, commerce and culture. Although many Quebecers also know English, French is the source of the culture that nourishes their everyday life.

Another major characteristic that sets Quebecers apart is that they descend from Canada's first settlers — their ancestors were among the first

discoverers of North America. Had Louis XV not ceded New France to the English in 1759, who is to say that North America would not today be a French-speaking continent?

French-Canadian culture has been marked by two contradictory forces: on the one hand, a nostalgia for lost spaces and the persistent desire to conquer lands beyond Quebec's borders; on the other hand, a mistrust, nurtured by the progressive retreat to an increasingly limited territory, and the fear of assimilation, always present in one form or another.

In English Canada, there are those who suggest that the concept of wide open spaces, the northern landscape in particular, is the essential source of artistic and literary creation. In Quebec, this dimension

seems absent altogether. The prevailing myths, which have nourished French-speaking artists for generations, are more concrete and immediate: the land, the community, the family and the tension between the desire to flee a confining world and the fear of exile.

Concentrated in agriculture, small business and the liberal professions, French Canadians were largely removed from the world of big business and major corporations. Their only source of power, resulting from their demographic weight and a kind of atavism that recalls the Irish in the United States, was politics.

In truth, the myth of the land in Quebec was considerably overwrought, given the realities that prevailed in the province. (Only a minority of Quebecers earned their living from farming, and, in fact, Quebec has relatively little prime farmland.) Yet, the

Scenes from Denys Arcand's *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* — a runaway commercial success both in Canada and abroad.

myth was systematically encouraged by the Catholic Church, long the sole guardian of thought in this small, homogeneous, inwardly focused community. As the city and the factory were regarded as places of perdition and assimilation, the Church encouraged "agricultural vocations," and, through interdictions and exhortations, stimulated the birth rate to prodigious levels.