

□ THE DECLINE OF THE AMERICAN EMPIRE □

How many people would be interested in knowing the inner thoughts of a group of corpulent, gossiping Quebec intellectuals? Judging by the reactions of the public and the critics, it appears that many people are — and prodigiously so.

And this is the surprising thing. Le Déclin de l'Empire Américain, the latest film by Denys Arcand, is more than just a commercial success. One might be tempted to attribute its popularity to a cultural phenomenon, because the subject appears so 'regional'. The very least one could say is that it is a well-done documentary on the ways and customs of French-speaking intellectuals in the over-forty bracket.

Since it is unusual for a Canadian film to generate so much interest, Liaison has reproduced below the comments of two observers from different cultural backgrounds, who attempt to explain why Le Déclin has penetrated the so-called cultural barriers and has aroused such a wide range of interest.

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The film is sexually explicit, since this is what a film must be today in order to sell and to attract the attention of critics. It is also funny, and then some. It is deep and thought-provoking — the type of film you remember and talk about later, like a book or painting that reveals hidden meanings as you go over it in your mind. This film leaves one with a bittersweet taste. You do not

quite know what to make of its mixture of cynicism, disenchanted lucidity, morality and philosophy. The expression, "unauthentic life," coined in the time of Sartre and Camus, comes to my mind when I think of some of its characters.

What more can I say? The music is very good, and the film moves along at a lively clip, even though it is mostly talking. In the very first scene, the tone is set of an intellectual film that does

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not take itself seriously — the sort of approach that Woody Allen would take if he were a Montrealer. This very long scene takes place in a subway station and consists of a terribly serious interview about a philosophical-historical book. It becomes almost comical because some parts have been left out.

Some scenes are not as well done, like that of the diver in the pool, which

is not even funny, or the man who urinates blood, purely for shock value, it seems. Others drag somewhat. The ending could have been about ten minutes shorter, and perhaps the pictures of Canada, although beautiful, were not necessary. I enjoyed the talk on day and night painters, and I would have enjoyed the book by Dominique J. If there was nothing wrong with this intellectual digression, I suppose the previous ones, for esthetes and landscape-lovers, were no less justified.

The acting was excellent, controlled and authentic throughout. How beautiful Danielle was, and how fortunate to believe in something and to be enthusiastic! She seemed so pure in this world of trickery — everyone is a deceiver in this film, except the young people.

Having said all this, I have yet to deal with the film in any detail. To do so is not an easy task. Should it be regarded seriously, or is it no more than a diversion?

To ask whether this film, with its more or less ribald comedy, bears a message would be to use too grandiloquent and too simplistic a term. But are there some lessons or some conclusions that can be drawn from it?

There are a few feminist tirades, for example, by the woman who was teaching at the CEGEP because she was bearing children during the years when only the men were studying for their doctorates.

Some observations are also made on the importance and limitations of sex, on which so much time and so many words are expended, on eating, culture, the body and the mind — other things which our so-called advanced society concerns itself with.