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**“The Decline of the American Empire”
A film by Denys Arcand
Reflections**

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Released in 1986 Denys Arcand’s *The Decline of the American Empire* received the International Critics Prize at Cannes, the Best Foreign Film award from the New York Film Critics Circle and an Oscar nomination. It’s part of an extended trilogy --*The Barbarian Invasions* in 2003, *Days of Darkness* released in 2007.

Decline. Invasion. Darkness. The specific sequence of titles suggests Arcand is making **a political statement**. This sequence uses themes modeled on Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* published in the late 1700’s. On Gibbon’s analysis, the Roman Empire succumbed to barbarian invasions resulting in the dark ages because of a decline in civic virtue. That is, according to Gibbon, the ancient Romans had turned inward, to pursue their own individual, personal pleasures. They neglected a higher, common social good. The decline was associated with the elevation of the private domain over the public domain, the individual over society so that the individual’s wants, needs and appetites came first. Arcand, like Gibbon, mentions the 4th century Roman emperor Diocletian as a turning point, but unlike Gibbon, Arcand doesn’t elaborate.

So, at first, it seems we're in for a major contemporary critique of America, maybe even of the West.

I.

Before we delve into its possible political interpretation, let's review the major overall structural elements of *The Decline*. Things happen very quickly, especially at the beginning of the film.

There are 5 structural elements:

First there's a history lesson. The film begins with Remy's history lecture on the importance of numbers in history. History is not a moral science, he says. This sets the tone for an investigation into how history should be understood. History here is both **public history** -- that is, the history of nations and civilizations -- as well as **private or personal history** -- that is, the life experiences of the individuals portrayed. Throughout the film, both senses of history -- public and personal -- are interwoven and carefully blended. In addition, in keeping with Remy's perspective on history as lacking morality, for most of the film, no moral judgments occur regardless of what is being discussed. History is presented simply as a sequence of events that have happened. Critical or moral judgments are avoided: affairs, professor-student relationships, group sex, casual sex, homosexuality, polygamy, polyandry, and so forth -- none of these receive any evaluation whatsoever. All behaviours and experiences are accepted, at face value, as things that have happened, without judgment.

Except once. The only time a critical judgment is made, a crisis is precipitated -- one that blows apart the happy gathering. I'll come to that in due course.

Secondly there's the interview. We move very quickly from the history lesson as the camera takes us down a long broad corridor. The music sounds majestic. At the end of this corridor we come to an important interview. Diane interviews Dominique. Diane, we later learn is a Teaching

Assistant in the History Department. She is freelancing for a CBC show. Dominique, on the other hand, is the chairperson of the History department. She has just published a book, *Changing Concepts of Happiness*. In this work Dominique contends that the focus on personal happiness is correlated with the decline of a nation or civilization. She contends that this is what is happening today, in contemporary society.

Diane asks Dominique to elaborate -- to address social disintegration and the decay of the elites. This provides the transition into the next section.

The third segment consists conversations. These take place with women in the gym and men in the kitchen of a house. The house is located on the eastern shores of Lake Memphramagog in Quebec's Eastern Townships, directly across from Quebec's most famous monastery, St. Benoit du Lac to which the camera occasionally pans. No one from Quebec would miss the symbolism of the self-assured Old Quebec (the monastery) and the free-wheeling style of the New Quebec led by its intellectuals. These individuals talk incessantly about their sexual experiences along with parsley, eggs, sugar and trout pie.

Sorting out the names of each of these individuals takes some time. The men are all members of a History department in a Quebec university. Three are professors – **Remy, Pierre and Claude** – and the younger man, **Alain**, is a graduate student. Alain does not seem to share the same proclivities as the older men and stands somewhat apart from them, not only in terms of where he is in his career as a historian but also in what he expects from life. Three of the women are connected also to the History department. **Dominique** is the chairperson. **Diane** is a teaching assistant. **Danielle** is a first year student. Only **Louise** is not connected with the program and she counterbalances Alain, standing apart from the women and having somewhat different expectations from them. Only one of the eight

individuals is married -- Remy – and he is married to Louise. Pierre is divorced as is Diane. Claude who is gay had lost a long-time companion due to a motorcycle accident and currently cruises. Danielle and Pierre are dating and we learn eventually how they met. Diane is seeing **Mario**. Mario disdains the group, having expected an orgy when he shows up at the rural retreat.

Diane's interview with Dominique sets up the sexual discussions. These end and so we return to the conclusion of her interview.

So, fourthly, there is the end of Diane's interview with Dominique. Dominique has addressed social disintegration and the decay of the intellectual elites. She says that signs of decline are everywhere. Here she addresses *public history* – society despising its own institutions, a national debt that is out of control, a shortened work week, rampant bureaucracies, a declining birth rate. In all these instances, individual wants supersede public requirements. She focuses on *personal history* as well. Here she observes that with the collapse of the Marxist-Leninist dream or any other social model that would seek to guide our personal lives, there are no models by which to live. She also adds that this historical decline is inevitable, just as aging is. We may be able to slow the process down but we can't stop it.

The final element is Louise's reaction to the interview. This is what precipitates the crisis. Louise injects a caustic comment directed at Dominique. It assaults her on two fronts. It's a *professional attack*. Louise, the only non-historian in the group, disputes Dominique's historical analysis saying that we live in an age of incredible rebirth -- that science has progressed and that life has never been better. It's also a *personal attack* -- she accuses Dominique of having sacrificed her life for a career. No other incident has provoked a similar outburst – everything else has been heard,

noted and accepted, without judgment. Yet Louise dares to impugn both Dominique's scholarship and her lifestyle. Dominique hesitates for a moment and then reveals that she has slept with both Pierre and Remy, Louise's husband. Louise is devastated, silenced, and feels betrayed by Remy's actions. Asked why she disclosed to the group that she had slept with Remy, Dominique adds that she wanted to get back at Louise, that she doesn't like blindness, people unable to see reality.

While all this is taking place, Danielle and Pierre look out into the night sky, towards the US and wonder if they'll someday be able to see the fireball over Plattsburgh, New York. There's a delicious irony here -- international missiles being talked about while personal missiles are being fired closer to home. Again, public history and personal history intersect.

It's the morning after the crisis. The mood of the gathering has shifted, disintegrated, and it's not one big happy family. People have paired off, each seeking solace with someone else, and the harmony of the group as a whole is shattered. Some are indeed happy – Diane having spent the night with Mario; Danielle and Pierre with Danielle wanting a baby by Pierre; Alain and Dominique. Others are less happy. Claude has cuddled Louise all night. Remy is feeling lousy and the winter of his relationship with Louise has set in. Intensely personal interests have triumphed over the harmony of the group, the personal over the group. Just as Dominique said is happening in society generally. And that is where the *Decline* ends.

II

The Decline of the American Empire is about many things and I'll highlight just three themes briefly.

For one thing, it is about non-judgmental sexual behavior.

Everything is fine; everything goes. Affairs, group sex, homosexuality,

lesbianism, masturbation, polygamy are all discussed. Diane has whip marks, has lived with two men simultaneously and likes Mario whom she describes as "a real man." Dominique prefers international sex – in Martinique, in Italy, Sicily. Pierre tells an amusing tale that when he was married, he invited a student to a Chinese restaurant in Brossard and when telling his wife that the faculty meeting ended at 4am, she simply responds, were the oysters fresh? Remy is the self-proclaimed sexual expert. He cheerfully recounts picking up two girls hitchhiking to New York, visiting a brothel, helping Mustafa find someone with whom to sleep. Ironically for the expert, he can't tell a man in drag from a real woman. Dominique discloses that Remy has slept with many students and staff at the university. It's all non-judgmental and every incident taken at face value.

We are in a post-modernist landscape here. There are no judgments, no absolutes, no moral rules, nor any model for living one's life. All the models have died and people are left to live life as best they can. This is twilight time for all the "ism's." There's a telling line in *The Barbarian Invasions* in which these same individuals reflect on the course of their professional lives. Post-Catholicism, they had embraced Marxism, Leninism, Marxism-Leninism, Freudianism, feminism, sovereignty-association-ism, post-modernism, structuralism, deconstructionism – and all the isms had failed. There is no ism left.

Sexuality is not just physical. For many of these individuals, sexual enjoyment represents a blend of the physical and the intellectual. Remy misses Barbara whom he met at a conference in San Diego. Years later he still periodically checks journals in Psychology, to see what she might have published. The scene with Pierre in the massage parlour is especially ironic – he comes just as Danielle speaks about the second coming of Christ and the end of history.

There is little mention of family, society or community. Sexual mores are just personal, nothing societal in nature. It's the triumph of the personal over the public. Their sexuality involves lying and deceit and here, again, Remy is the expert. Lying, he says, is the basis of all our love affairs, of our social existence, and the professional historians burlesque this by saying what they would tell an esteemed colleague from the prestigious universit  Laval – "impressive research, excellent work," and so on.

The absence of commitment points to a fascinating aspect of the film, its hedonistic bent. They are all trying to satisfy themselves with instant gratification when opportunities come along. They are focused on the present. There is no thoughtful analysis of their sexual histories, except, that is, for Dominique. Her analysis bookends the lengthy sexual discussion – an important structural feature of the film. Dominique is the only one – the only historian – who has analyzed the pattern – the past, the present and the future. She is the only one who has attempted an historical analysis that weaves together personal with public history, the only one who makes the connections. The rest of the participants, in spite of being historians, are focused primarily on the moment. They are living exemplars of her thesis.

It is fascinating that there is another book present in the film, not just Dominique's. It's one by Michel Brunet. Brunet was a famous Quebec historian, chair of the history department at the Universit  de Montr al from 1959 to 1968 and who wrote a book: *Notre pass , le pr sent et nous* – that is, *Our Past, The Present and Us*. Published in 1976, it's the book that Mario gives to Diane as a gift. It's an indictment of all that Mario has witnessed and despises about intellectuals. It's his parting shot. Here are the so-called elite historians talking about talking about sex, devoid of any historical context, any commitment to the future and concentrating only on the present. This attitude exemplifies the decay of the social elites ... precisely Dominique's point in her book.

So one theme is non-judgmental sexual behavior and what it portends.

III

The Decline can also be viewed as a statement about history, with personal histories acting as a metaphor for the decline of the American civilization. This is Dominique's thesis in her book, *Changing Concepts of Happiness*. Her interview with Diane right at the outset of the film goes by very quickly – perhaps too quickly for most viewers of the film – and it is difficult to remember her historical analysis because, perhaps, we don't expect a lecture so soon within the format of a film. Her point is that the concept of personal happiness emerges within a society as it begins to decline and she indicates what she means by personal happiness – instant gratification. The alternative would be a society that would place greater importance on the community, on the collective good or future happiness. She poses the question: "is the frantic drive for personal happiness we see in society today linked to the decline of the American empire as we are now experiencing it?"

And Arcand seems to answer that question in the affirmative, the private histories of the eight individuals confirming that sexual appetites have overwhelmed commitment to any communal good.

Since Gibbon's book in the 18th century, there have been many analyses of the decline of civilization --Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* (1918); Arnold Toynbee's twelve volume *A Study of History* (1934-1961); several books on amazon.com called *The Decline of the American Empire* including one by Gore Vidal; and, shortly after Denys Arcand's film, Francis Fukuyama's influential essay, "*The End of History.*"

The link between the title of the film and its content -- between Dominique's book and the sexual witticisms of the participants -- is the

interplay between public and private history. For Arcand, the dominance of sexual appetite, unrestrained by any self-awareness of the larger community, presages the decline. And, while Dominique in her interview cites numerous factors for the decline, only one seems to be borne out in the film: the decadence of the social elites through their preoccupation with selfish interests.

There are also other factors at play here: the rise of female sexuality -- this was the era of Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*. There are gender power politics at work. When we see the women -- they are the jocks -- in the gym. The men are in the kitchen -- domesticated. Traditional roles have been reversed. We notice, too, that when together, women get along well with women and the men with the other men. Only when they are together as a group do tensions arise.

IV

Not just non-judgmental sexual behavior. Not just historical analysis. **The Decline of the American Empire can also be seen as about narcissism, excessive preoccupation with the self and one's own interests and gratification**, to the exclusion of communal, familial and societal requirements.

A popular book shortly before the *Decline* was produced was Christopher Lash's *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. Like Arcand, Lash's book makes references to Woody Allen, Susan Sontag, R.D. Laing and makes many similar points, so much so that one may wonder if this book provided background reading for Arcand.

V

So – non-judgmental behavior in which personal appetites dominate; historical decline; narcissistic preoccupations – we find all these themes in Denys Arcand’s film. The world’s first psychologist and theorist of history – Plato – however, told us all this in his work, *The Republic*. There he held up as a model the ideal society. It would be one in which knowledge and decision-making for the common good would prevail. Using his terminology, that ideal society would be one characterized by people, especially the elite, in which the rational self predominated over the irrational part. Decisions would be made for the common, public good. Society declines, Plato says, when the reverse is true, that is, when irrational appetite controls our decision-making apparatus and we act on the basis of individual selfish motives without regard for the greater good.

Arcand seems to agree.