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URBANITY IN POSTMODERN CANADIAN CINEMA: DENYS  
ARCAND'S *JÉSUS DE MONTRÉAL*

*You never get away from where you come from*<sup>1</sup>  
Denys Arcand

For Denys Arcand Montreal is an adopted city. He was raised in the village of Deschambault on the St. Lawrence River, not far from Quebec City. According to his biographer, Réal La Rochelle, he also made the village his home when he was forging his career as a filmmaker from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s. Yet he had spent his high school and college years (1950s) in Montreal and he had worked there, first for the National Film Board, and later as an independent filmmaker. He came to Montreal as a student migrant from rural Quebec, a psychological and cultural space that prided itself on its devout Catholicism, the preservation of the French language, the sanctity of the traditional family and a veneration of the land as the fundamental elements of French-Canadian identity. In Arcand's case this conservative, rural foundation clashed in a creative way with the sophisticated and self-important urbanity of Montreal and its Quiet Revolution of the 1960s. Arcand brought the two opposing forces together in the form of a new, critical, personal consciousness—an awareness of the problems inherent in both. That is why Arcand's films display a contrarian's dual allegiance—to the weight of the past and its values and to the present with its conflicted and profoundly diverse sensibilities. He is comfortable in neither.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Denys Arcand: A Life in Film*, Réal La Rochelle, tr. Alston Strayer (Toronto: McArthur & Company, 2004) 42.

His signature film, *Jésus de Montréal* (1989), which followed on his Oscar-nominated film *Le déclin de l'empire américain* (1986) explored the seemingly vain and hedonistic pursuits of urbane academics.<sup>2</sup> In 1989, after completing *Jésus de Montréal* he described the meaning of the film held for him:

*Jesus of Montreal* was born from juxtaposing with the themes of the Passion according to Saint Mark, my memories of life as an altar boy in a remote village that had been Catholic for centuries, and my daily experience as a filmmaker in a big cosmopolitan city. I will always be nostalgic about that time of my life, when religion provided a soothing answer to the most insolvable problems, while remaining quite aware of how much obscurantism and demagogy these false solutions contained... Through the thick fog of the past, I hear the echo of a profoundly disturbing voice... All my films exude this loss of faith. It's always with me.<sup>3</sup>

Arcand uses the idea of juxtaposition to express his own experiences of intellectual and cultural migration from one context to another, both contexts residing in the same national identity. When these elements are juxtaposed as they are in Arcand, a current is produced—a flow between two antithetical polarities. This current may be equated with Arcand's personal trajectory, an evolution that parallels that of Quebec as it rose after 1960 from a long period of “obscurantism and demagogy” toward a newly found cosmopolitanism and by the 1990s, a self-made place in the world's globalized economy.<sup>4</sup> This is the flow of modernism into postmodernism.

From Arcand's statement Montreal appears as the city where he lost his original, born-into faith. But the faith that he lost was a traditional one, associated with a repressed past, village life and childhood, that in adulthood he considers dysfunctional and empty. In *Jésus de Montréal* he posits another faith—fresh, alive and engaged. It is Christian to a profound degree but it is not dogmatic or catechismic. It is a “heretical”

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of easy identification, all French-language Quebec films that were released with an English title, whether simply subtitled or dubbed, will be referred to by their English titles.

<sup>3</sup> La Rochelle, *Denys Arcand*, 44.

<sup>4</sup> Scott MacKenzie argues that both *Decline* and *Jesus* are examples of the internationalization of Quebec cinema and identity. See Scott MacKenzie, *Screening Quebec: Québécois moving images, national identity, and the public sphere* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) 173.

interpretation stripped of clerical encrustation and naked in its purity. Arcand achieves this revitalized sense of Christian values and devotion by blending the past (the New Testament story of two thousand years ago) with the present (Montreal today), the religious (the Passion of Christ) with the secular (the theatre), the rural (Mont Royal) with the urban (from the soup kitchen to the revolving restaurant). The concept of losing one's faith becomes for Arcand a rediscovery, a return to his lost faith's fundamentals, that makes him re-Christianized or reborn. Montreal is turned into a city of faith and the film that Arcand conceived and wrote a kind of Sermon on the Mount, in this case Mont Royal Park.

The great Quebec filmmaker, Jacques Brault, has described Arcand's films as "a kind of history project on modern Quebec" but that history has been volatile, revolutionary, and modernizing. Arcand has experienced it directly in his own life and viewed that experience from his religious background rather than from the perspective of any adopted ideology.<sup>5</sup> In *Jésus de Montréal* he confronts both the dried-up Catholicism of the past and the empty secularism of his adulthood with equal condemnation. He connects his two worlds by universalizing or eternalizing the Christian message. By situating the Passion story in the present context and stripping away the past (Roman Jerusalem) Arcand has removed the distancing of history and turned the narrative into a mythological metaphor of the human condition applicable at all times and everywhere. Rather than create a period piece on Christ as other filmmakers have done Arcand has created a contemporary drama, which is what the original biblical narrative was for its writers. By situating the Passion story in Montreal the historical and cultural differences between Jerusalem and Montreal are erased. The moral choices in the biblical narrative remain applicable today. Arcand's view that the religio-centric world of his Duplessis-era childhood and the secularized world of Levesque-era adulthood are not far apart is rooted in a Catholic belief that historical change or progress is transitory and unimportant from a spiritual perspective and that history is the home of unchanging, flawed and sinful human nature. We are not watching history, Arcand might say; we are watching reality.

Arcand's sensitivity to the biblical story infuses the film with the Christian gospel of love. Situating Christ's Passion in the contemporary world as a problematic play within a daily drama that reflects the play and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 64.

its actors is an innovation that elevates the metaphoric power of creativity to new heights. When Norman Jewison tried to deal with the same subject in his film adaptation of the musical *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, some twenty years earlier, the result was not half as powerful. Maybe it was simply the lack of gravitas associated with the musical form (the Passion was never contemporized but left in its historical period) or even Jewison's own Protestant English background that somehow could not raise the material to its tragic heights. It would seem that a devout Catholic upbringing like Arcand's, albeit rejected, and his subsequent immersion in a dynamic, secular Montreal lifestyle were the two forces that could generate such a sense of angst and profound insight. When the intensity of urbanity meets the burning coals of its rural nemesis, the sparks lead to fire.

The inaugural spark in Arcand's urbanity was his traditional Jesuit education.

"I owe what I am to them," he has remarked.<sup>6</sup> The Jesuits, as he relates, introduced him to the power of Italian neo-realism in its heyday. For this rural migrant the relatively educated and cosmopolitan interests of his Jesuit teachers were a breakthrough, while the artistry of post-war Italian cinema with its intense Catholic context provided a bridge to a new world. He walked across it quickly attracted by the possibilities of individual creativity. It was urbanity that opened Arcand's eyes to cinema (Quebec had a law against children attending movie theatres). It wasn't Hollywood but European cinema at an advanced level (cleric-initiated film clubs were popular venues for students to mingle) that appealed to the young intelligentsia. When Arcand joined the ONF at the age of 21 he went to the only place in the country where he could become a filmmaker, a documentarist, because Canada did not have a feature film industry at that time. What he had been viewing in the film clubs of his university years did not exist in Quebec, but the birth of the Quiet Revolution and its slogan of "Maitres chez nous" was a rallying cry that pointed in the direction of self-expression and the possibility of creating something that did not exist.

The National Film Board (ONF), which was making Montreal its new organizational home with a distinct French-language production unit, was the second urbanizing factor. The sixties were a time of cinematic renewal with new developments in the documentary mode, especially the approach termed *cinéma directe*, which emphasized populist subjects and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 66.

narrative spontaneity. The renewal was fueled by this cinematographic innovation and the new cadre of daring, young filmmakers, who knew each other and worked together. The nationalist impulse was exploding in Quebec in the radical sixties and it culminated in the October Crisis of 1970. This impulse to turn the province from its old identity as French-Canadians to a new national identity as an independent Quebec was widespread and profound, especially among the cultural and intellectual elite to which Arcand belonged. Added to this heady mix was the rebirth of Quebec feature films, incubated by the ONF, of which Claude Jutra's masterful *Mon oncle Antoine* (1970) is the most famous. Cultural self-assertion was no longer limited to television, literature, the stage and music but came to include narrative cinema. Arcand's association with the ONF taught him his craft, but also generated the desire to go beyond the documentary mode. The sixties were about removing the old restrictions in whatever form and Arcand was swept up in that energizing process of cultural liberation.

The third element in Arcand's urbanity was the political revolution centred in Montreal—the movement for Quebec independence, which in the radical 60s, was decidedly leftist and national liberation-oriented. When Arcand did his working-class ONF documentary *On est au coton* in 1970 he acknowledged the importance of the factory worker, something that was *au courant* in the ideological milieu of the time. His hard-hitting portrayal of women workers in a cotton mill was so controversial that the ONF refused to release it. The original was finally shown in 1994 and only released in 2004. While still living in his native village of Deschambault he also wrote and directed *Réjeanne Padovani*, a film about a Montreal mobster and then a year later (1974) he came out with *Gina*, a docu-drama about the censorship of *Coton*. Every one of these films is Montreal-centric. Arcand even did a short film on a hospital workers labour dispute in the eastern townships. But it was not until the electoral radicalism of the 1970s (the triumph of Renée Levesque's PQ) ended with the loss of the 1980 independence referendum that the Arcand was able to express the contradictions of the new Quebec with his own vision. The palpable disappointment over the public's hesitancy over independence was a catalyst for self-reflection and self-criticism. The promise had been overturned by reality and this provoked a sense of satirical relief from the seriousness of the political project with which Arcand had sympathized.

*Le déclin de l'empire américain* was his breakthrough 1986 film. It represented the second, and to date the most creative, stage of his career. *Jésus* followed quickly on its heels. His friend and biographer, La Rochelle believes that both films and *Jésus* in particular is “intimately linked to Montreal...”<sup>7</sup> That intimacy is worth exploring because of what the term intimacy implies—closeness, understanding, compatibility, and even revelation. Eventually both films were linked to his most successful and much later film—*Les invasions barbares* (2003), which won an Oscar for best foreign film.<sup>8</sup> In a chapter of his biography titled “Denys of Montreal” La Rochelle points out that “most of Arcand’s films take place in Montreal, which is certainly the case in his feature films.”<sup>9</sup>

The characters in *Le déclin* are intellectually trendy academics who live in the city but retreat to the countryside for a good time that ends in serious self-reflection. The retreat to the countryside (to the same abode used in *Le déclin*) also plays a key role in *Les invasions barbares* and if we consider Mont Royal Park a symbolism of rurality in *Jésus* we have representations of the rural in each film of the trilogy. This suggests that the duality in his worldview described earlier in this chapter is presented in each film. In all three films, the city is presented as a place of ideological fashionableness and spiritual emptiness, a place crying out for redemption in some fundamental way, while the rural countryside is presented as a place for introspection and conviviality, a place of human community, which the city lacks. We work and struggle to achieve in the city, Arcand seems to be saying, while in nature we find ourselves with ours in moments of peace. It is as if humanity needs this rural connection as a place to reflect on the drama of life. This approach parallels his own life up to the mid-eighties, where the village allowed for creativity, while the city was the locus of cinematic production.

In *Jesus of Montreal* it is Mont Royal (origin of the name ‘Montreal’), a park which overlooks the city and on which is planted a huge cross

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 190.

<sup>8</sup> The argument for considering the three films a trilogy is made by George Melnyk, *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) 142 and confirmed by La Rochelle, *Denys Arcand* who also believes that *Jesus of Montreal* forms a diptych with *The Decline* [and *Barbarian Invasions*] 190. The initial script for *Barbarian Invasions* was written in 1991, a year after the release of *Jesus of Montreal*, 200.

<sup>9</sup> La Rochelle, *Denys Arcand*, 192.

symbolizing the city's connection to Christianity that may be considered the equivalent of the countryside or the rural. While the city is the opposite of the country, the city retains natural spaces. Likewise in the dichotomy of past and present, the past of a city is retained in old architecture and design, even as new buildings go up. The enactment of the drama of the Cross on Mont Royal authenticates Montreal as a version of Jerusalem because the original crucifixion occurred "outside" the city at the hill of Golgotha so as not to stain the sacredness of the city. The parallels in time and place arise out of Arcand's own contradictory duality—the rural past and the urban present.

The centrality of Montreal to Arcand's cinema of contradictions is described metaphorically by La Rochelle as "... the cocoon of his intellectual and artistic training...the flip side of Deschambault-de-Portneuf..."<sup>10</sup> One may view Arcand's urban experience as a kind of permeation or penetration, a barbarian invasion of his originating psyche. Urbanity began as an assault on his traditional upbringing but it was not completely victorious. It ended up being transformed by the persistence of that earlier upbringing into a vital mythology or metaphor—the city of faith. The energizing and optimistic urban secularity Arcand experienced in the 1960s destroyed the identity he had brought with him to the city but then it left him dissatisfied, questioning the substitutes for religion that modernization offered him. Arcand highlighted the conflict when he said that "secularity is doubtless the most obvious acquisition of the Quiet Revolution."<sup>11</sup> Beginning with *Le déclin*, culminating in *Jésus*, and then reiterated in *Les invasions*, Arcand presented secularity as a spiritual poison equivalent to the poison of traditional Catholicism, a hypocrisy that demanded confrontation and exposure. The Quiet Revolution's triumph of secularity over religion is presented in *Jésus de Montréal* as a fundamentally empty triumph. For Arcand replacing the cassock with a business suit is not a sign of authentic progress. The artist despises both, though both are entrenched in him as his fundamental identity.

The plot of the film centers on an actor named Daniel (Lothaire Bluteau), who is recruited by a cleric to rejuvenate an annual Passion Play. Like Christ, Daniel collects a disparate group of actors engaged in various unappealing jobs and turns them into vehicles and examples of his message. The production proves popular but its interpretation of the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 192.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 274.

Gospels is heretical and is closed down by the priest. During the closure Daniel is injured and eventually dies. The film contains a number of scenes that appear in the New Testament, including Christ's driving the moneychangers out of the Temple, while a scene in the Montreal Metro serves as a symbolic tomb from which Daniel 'arises' much like Christ did. Bill Marshall, in his magisterial *Quebec National Cinema* claims that the film seems to be "a reworking of an old myth" rather than exploring something new.<sup>12</sup> "Reworking" is an understatement for what Arcand has done in the film. While the life of Christ has been told cinematically before, the success of Arcand's retelling comes from its profound connection to French-Canadian culture. Without his deep Catholic roots, the reverence with which Arcand imbues the film would be totally lacking. While attacking clerical hypocrisy the film (he equates the Catholic priest with the Temple priests of Christ's day) Arcand is able to build an overpowering Christian imagery, using a contemporary venue and the conceit of a play within a play/movie. Marshall feels the film does not contain any "new cultural hybridities", which makes it un-postmodern for its time.<sup>13</sup> The film may not be postmodern ideologically, but it is obviously postmodern in structure, plot and characterization. Its approach is multi-layered and complex. Considering Arcand's background in both the old world of French-Canada and the new world of the Québécois, plus his personal trajectory within this profound historical change, one can see that the film is an expression of a deeply-rooted culture meeting the contemporary world, rather than that of a minority voice filled with postcolonialist critique. Aswell, a postmodern retelling of Christ's last days filled with sociologically valid cultural hybridities may have muted the dialogue that Arcand was engaged in with his own people, the creators of the new, secular, post-Quiet Revolution Quebec.

Marshall confirms this when he states that the film cast Montreal itself "as a generalized *Cité*, a place of sin, corruption, modest heroics..." and that its representation in the film is "crucial to an understanding of the relationship between modernity and postmodernity."<sup>14</sup> Montreal is the place where modernization and secularization are born and triumph. Marshall points out that Montreal, prior to the Quiet Revolution, was a

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<sup>12</sup> Bill Marshall, *Quebec National Cinema* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001) 294.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 297.



strange place for rural French-Canadians because of its Anglo economic domination. This domination by the Other was an excuse for its being viewed as different from the rest of Quebec—the authentic, real Quebec. What Arcand did in *Jésus* was bring that sense of urban strangeness, that aura of temptation and distraction, into the broader Quebec identity from which he had been alienated. Montreal was not longer some outside dark force that had to be resisted. It was a dark force that resided within the body politic itself and included every Quebecker. The historic changes may have been initiated by the city and its elite, but in the end it embraced everyone, often with majority approval. So secularity was no longer the “fault” of the Other. Montreal was now a world created by the new Québécois, in which the Other had been reduced to a distinct minority. A Francophone state and an indigenous Francophone capitalism were at the heart of the new Montreal and the mastery that the Quiet Revolution demanded. Arcand the moralist was confronting a new self that all Francophone Quebeckers shared.

The claustrophobic world of Claude Jutra’s *Mon oncle Antoine*, set in the old rural Quebec that Arcand knew as a boy, stands in sharp contrast to the commercially vibrant Montreal of *Jésus* some 40 years later. In the former the *maudits anglais* cast a shadow that suggested an outward cause of dysfunction, death and hopeless imprisonment, while in the latter the source of evil is within francophones themselves but for whom there is a way to salvation and change. If the postmodernist vision reflects positively on the diversity brought on by modernization and secularism, Arcand responds in this film with an innate pessimism about the human condition. He carries within himself the moralist’s ahistorical critique of progress. He tends to see an unchanging human condition in which the results of being *maitres chez nous* become pathetic, if not empty. In contrast he posits simple human love and caring, a moral order that makes sense.

Arcand begins his film with a moral order in which Montreal parallels the moral order of Jerusalem in Jesus’s day. The spiritual emptiness of theatre goers, who only see the superficiality of fame, and the commercial ritual of Montreal are equated with moral climate created by secular progress. Values are commercial rather than emotional. This city as vice implies the city as faith, where humans test themselves against the temptations and desires of modernity. In *Jésus* eternity wins.

Pierre Nepveu and Gilles Marcotte, editors of *Montréal Imaginaire*, believe that Montreal is the ur-city of Quebecois identity, which may be

why it serves as such a strong metaphor for the collective unconscious. “Montréal n’est pas tout; elle est peut-être l’image du tout,” they write.<sup>15</sup> They call the city “la ville-mère, la ville-marie” emphasizing the city’s sacredness by using its original European name associated with the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God.<sup>16</sup> Montreal as the city of the Mother of God becomes a city of sin that requires salvation. The city is made to carry this quality to the exclusion of other qualities in order to manufacture a stage or platform on which drama can occur. The loss of faith (we are all sinners) and the finding of faith (we are all redeemable) are the polarities that Arcand juxtaposes and unites in his highly sympathetic treatment of human beings as failed creatures. The emptiness of secular Montreal and its fullness as a spiritual place requires the other just like belief and non-belief need each other in order to stand out. The conflict between the two forces turns the film into a catalyst for what one academic calls “...greater debate about the cultures in which they [the films] are produced, screened and seen.”<sup>17</sup> Arcand’s film is meant to raise discussion, to challenge conventional truisms and hype, to create an arena of debate. His audience is one whose culture is firmly rooted in Christian mythology. The inheritors of that culture can respond to his imagery. In 1989, when he made this film, the multi-racial world that is now Montreal was only emerging. The film looks back onto the previous twenty years rather than looking at the future.

Arcand’s imagining of Montreal is both historically specific and universal in a mythological sense. He creates a universal entity that is an all-encompassing venue for human life (the city), but then he overlays this identity with a historically accurate reality, which is Montreal in 1990. But this imagining is rooted in his rural past because the city that is not his birth place. Simon Harel of the *Université du Québec à Montréal* writes about the Anglophone and Allophone realities of Montreal in his essay “La parole orpheline de l’écrivain migrant.”<sup>18</sup> What he has to say about immigrant writers, who have made Montreal their home, has

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<sup>15</sup> Pierre Nepveu et Gilles Marcotte, *Montréal imaginaire: Ville et littérature* (Montreal: Fides, 1992) 7. “Montreal isn’t everything; but it is probably the image of everything.” (My translation).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> MacKenzie, *Screening Québec*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Simon Harel, “La parole orpheline de l’écrivain migrant” in Nepveu et Marcotte, *Montréal imaginaire*.

relevance and application to Arcand's migrant situation. Sociologically, linguistically, ethnically and geographically Montreal was distinct from the rest of Quebec society, including Quebec City, because of its post-conquest diversity, which does not exist in the rest of the province, the Eastern Townships notwithstanding. Its heterogeneity has made it a kind of Other.<sup>19</sup> Arcand is part of one part of Montreal—the Francophone part. And when he describes the Allophone part (the Jewish hospital) in the film, he presents it as a successful opposite. The Other of the Other City seems much less chaotic and conflicted than his own reality in Francophone Montreal.

If one considers Arcand as an internal exile from the old Quebec, that non-Montreal Quebec, he must somehow make Montreal his own. His understanding is based on being an outsider and that kind of consciousness is often critical, aware of the failings and the problems glossed over by official interpretations. A postcolonial writer would write of the racism and hardships facing his or her group. Arcand can't do that but he can find something problematic with his own group, just as Mordecai Richler did in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. It is fair to say that Arcand's initial *not being at home* in Montreal and later making Montreal a home suggests a process of *liberation* from the past that allows him to embrace the present as the past's equal. He does not pine for the past. He critiques it. He does not laud the present. He critiques it. The self that the artist creates that says something positive is one that is neither the self of the past nor the self of the present. It is always, Harel argues, the self of the future—the potential, possible or idealized self.<sup>20</sup> That is why there is a hopeful message at the end of the film, a hopefulness that bespeaks a biblical redemption. The artist in a new land wants to find a place where the new world makes sense. For Arcand *Jésus* and *Le déclin* before it are the two films that allow him to do that self-consciously and with artistic integrity.

In *Jésus* the hybridity and multilingual reality of the city has only one expression—when Daniel is taken to the non-French hospital because the French one is overcrowded and hopeless. In the hospital of the non-

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 389.

<sup>20</sup> Harel claims that the immigrant writer creates a space of potentiality in order to deal with being a stranger. It is the place where conflicting identities are resolved. (398). The ironic reality is that this idealized resolution for place—a dreamed place of happiness is only a dream, a fantasy.

French Other he gets good treatment. The rest of the film takes place within a total Francophone context. Again we have Arcand's primarily binary universe, in which there must be some small presence of otherness to make the narrative work. Mont Royal as the symbol of the rural is not a significant presence but a vital one, all the same. Likewise the Jewish hospital is not a dominant reality, but a vital one for the meaning of the film. It is as if Arcand's roots in another Quebec must appear in his films like a cameo appearance that he cannot do without.

Montreal as the place of familiarity and difference has its ethnic divisions, but these divisions are not presented as spiritually fundamental, whatever their sociological import. What is fundamental is the overarching moral crisis that requires salvation and it is this crisis that imparts a unity to Montreal, a singularity that floats above ethnic divisions. In commenting about his 2003 film *Les invasions barbares*, also set in Montreal, Arcand said that "After Duplessis and the Church, Quebec woke up to a world without structure..."<sup>21</sup> He has returned a "structure" to the new Quebec, which is a distilled or purified version of its religious past. Arcand entered Montreal from a francophone reality and remained within that reality. He took his sense of the sacred, that Catholic upbringing, and transferred it to a diverse environment, whose diversity he saw from one side only. His Montreal is both sacred and secular, both a spirit and a living society. The sacredness of the film is diegetic—an envelope that surrounds the audience with spiritually. The secular is dialogical, because it involves the elements that specify time, place and people or actors. But the dialogical, because it is symbolic, is clothed in the diegetic myth of the Passion. In this way the city's Métro is both Christ's and Daniel's tomb (sacred) and a subway (secular). The actor Daniel is both an actor (secular) and a saintly embodiment of Christ (sacred). Mont Royal is both a park and Golgotha. Montreal is both the city of the temple (Jerusalem) and Sodom and Gomorrah, the city of sin. In this way the Montreal of Arcand cannot be the Montreal of others—of Anglophone writers like Hugh MacLennan or Allophone writers like Mordecai Richler. But what Arcand, who speaks out of the majority, shares with these minority writers is what Harel sees as melancholy and what the English Canadian film scholar, Jim Leach, calls "ingrained pessimism."<sup>22</sup> The tragic is appealing to a writer, who feels estranged.

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<sup>21</sup> La Rochelle, *Denys Arcand*, 273.

<sup>22</sup> Jim Leach, *Film in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2006) 114.

*Jésus de Montréal* is not about happiness. It is about suffering leading to a spiritual awakening and human transformation. With its message of hope and resurrection (Daniel's organs are transplanted into those who require them) the film parallels the mood of the Biblical story very closely. Personal sacrifice is the main idea. The interaction of the divine and the human (the basic binary that underlays Arcand's other binaries) results in a world of "double vision" with two opposing, but united aspects constantly at play, thus allowing the audience to view any event in the film from either the secular or the sacred side.<sup>23</sup> In fact, one can say that the whole thrust of the film is a display of how the secular is redeemable through divine intervention. Daniel, the actor, is mysteriously transformed from his secular occupation as an actor into a divine mission as a saviour of compatriots. In this way Arcand's retelling of the Passion becomes a sermon and he a priest or better still, an evangelist like the official authors of the New Testament.

What may be valuable to an understanding of the way *Jésus of Montréal* operates as the transition between Arcand's rural childhood and his urban adulthood is how both his earlier film *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* and his later film *Les Invasions barbares* while being Montreal-centric offer a certain spiritual primacy to the rural—in both cases the same country retreat where the same characters from both films gather to reflect and celebrate conviviality and community. At the country retreat the unilingual universe of

Quebec's secularized intellectual elite seems to be a reflection of the old modernist Catholicism because of its homogeneity. Here the old world retains some currency.

But this country retreat does not exist in *Jésus*. Here the rural is a hilltop park, nature within the metropolis. But it plays the same role as the country house—it is a space of spiritual understanding far from the economic and political interests of the day. For Arcand Mont Royal is a sacred place and by sacred he means the urban-surrounded space left for nature.

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<sup>23</sup> Leach considers Arcand's trademark approach as being one of a "double vision" or presenting things in a dual way. Ibid. 118.

## Death and Redemption in the City of Faith

A closer examination of one or two key scenes and characterizations brings out the sense of what a city of faith means for Arcand, of how Christian narrative and symbolism imbues the film's *mis en scene* and how death is the overarching partner of redemption. *Jésus de Montréal* begins with a theatrical production in which the protagonist commits suicide because of despair. The film ends with a character, also an actor in a play (and a film) who dies for the sake of others. The two deaths that anchor either ends of the narrative are contrasted in a theological way—the former condemned for its hopelessness and the latter held up as a model for how to redeem oneself and others. In both cases the paradigm of a play creates a church-like sanctuary for a ritual performance. In the beginning play there is nothing but sin, while in the concluding play there is complete hope and a sense of salvation. Goodness replaces bleakness. Arcand creates a moral dichotomy by having the audience for the first play praise the actor for his portrayal of a suicide, while not being touched by its moral implications. In contrast the audience for the second, Christ-like death is non-existent, except for a few loyal fellow actors, who have been converted to Daniel's Christian view of the world. This is Arcand's reflection of both the original Christian text and his own critique of secular society. The public speaks socially approved platitudes in the first play, while it stands silent and distant at the end of the second. The audience for Daniel's Passion performance is moved genuinely before the play is closed down, but it does not act in a transformative way. It absorbs but does not return. Only his fellow actors, who become disciples of his values, are there for him. When death takes on divine overtones, its meaning is conveyed to others, who have been inspired to spread the message. The theology of the film suggests that one can make one's death an imitation of a divine death by dying for others rather than just for oneself.

The Catholicism that underpins the whole film is one that contains traditional elements and also contra-traditional elements. The following scene expresses that curious blend of past and present Quebec that inhabits the film. When Daniel meets the priest, who wants to reinvigorate the Passion Play and so increase audiences, the two meet in a cathedral-like church. The vast space itself is empty except for the two of them. On the one hand, the scene is a reflection of the old piety of

Quebec, expressed in grand churches. On the other hand, the church is profoundly empty. It is a contemporary shell that bespeaks the moral bankruptcy of the priest and the church he represents. The human and the divine spirit is missing and that is what Daniel brings to it. Asking an actor to revitalize the church is surely a strange request that suggests a certain illusionary quality to the project. We don't want real piety, the priest is saying, only the emotional equivalent of relevance that an actor can put on. The priest, of course, is a hypocrite, engaged in an illicit sexual relationship. He does not become a follower, a person who is saved.

The dramatic decline of traditional Catholicism in Quebec is a sociological fact, whose cultural significance Arcand, like others, is struggling to comprehend. The "empty sepulcher" of the Passion is contrasted to the "empty sepulcher" of the church and its priests. In the former the emptying of the tomb brings hope and new life. In the latter the emptiness is a kind of death. The priest has no real hope for genuine renewal. He only wants to look good. Arcand indicates that salvation cannot come from the empty vessel of traditional Catholicism, but from the outside, from those who are morally pure or purified.

Guy Hennebelle, a French film critic, wrote an article in 1975 titled "Le Cinéma Québécois" in which he quoted Jean Chabot, the auteur director of a film titled

*Mon Enfance à Montréal* as saying that "le cinéma canadien-français est mort. Voici maintenant l'ère cinéma québécois."<sup>24</sup> Arcand's cinema is clearly of that Quebecois variety, however, the French-Canadian roots of that cinema cannot be hidden or erased from the new identity. It persists and Arcand represents a powerful continuity between the two identities—the traditional one and the modernized one. Without that continuity he could not have "wedded" the story of first century Jerusalem and twentieth century Montreal so effectively, and without that continuity in his own consciousness and that of his primary audience he could not have turned a contemporary Quebec society into a reflection of Judaic society in the Roman era. The line from his past to his present is what gives the narrative its strength and meaning. For some, like Bill Marshall, this may be a drawback and an ethnic limitation, but one can also argue that this singularity creates a dramatic potential filled with universality. The

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<sup>24</sup> Guy Hennebelle, *Les cinémas nationaux contre Hollywood* (Paris, Éditions du cerf, 2004) 183.

audience, which is aware of the biblical story, sees itself in that story as much as it sees itself in Montreal. The actors become personifications of ourselves, just as they are personifications of the biblical figures. For an international audience, the Quebec milieu is subsumed by this greater identification with the human condition, while for the Quebec audience this identification is augmented by its sense of being insiders.

Arcand's personal and historic journey from being a French-Canadian to being a Québécois filmmaker is one of transformation, which is the message of the film and the message of the Passion Play itself. Christ was Jewish but his followers founded a new religion based on Judaism that was not Judaic. This is the contradiction of continuity between old and new, whether it be young Arcand and mature Arcand, old Quebec or new Quebec. That continuity is a journey that needs to be read as being within one people. Even though Arcand is trapped by history and his own specificity, the morality he espouses is for all peoples and if he had not experienced the historic, religious transformation of Quebec, he could not have engaged with the theme of transformation in this film in such a profound, multi-layered way. If he had not been a migrant from the past, he could not have viewed the present with such critical force. If he had not been imbued with earlier spiritual values, he could not have challenged contemporary religious reality and made that challenge something eternal.

When a collection of essays titled "The Cinema of Canada" appeared in 2006, a scene from *Jésus* graced the cover.<sup>25</sup> Why the publisher chose this image is unknown, but its selection suggests that the film is somehow identified with Canada today. There is no essay in the book on the film, but there it is on the cover. The image is of the two actors playing Christ and Mary Magdalene in the re-enacted Passion Play touching heads but without any backdrop. The male actor's head is bleeding from a crown of thorns. The Christian reference is clear. The subjects of the image are pain, suffering, death and love. The image is a reminder of the role of death in redemption. In order for redemption to happen something must die. Taken from its religious context and politicized, the image presents Arcand's sense of a deceased traditional nationality and its rebirth of a new Quebec, which in turn must also be redeemed by morality. In this way he ties together biblical themes, historic themes in Quebec, and a statement of personal morality that turns urbanity into *the* site of transformation. It makes Montreal a sacred site, as was its original

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<sup>25</sup> Jerry White ed. *The Cinema of Canada* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006)



imagining. No wonder one Russian critic termed him “the last humanist” of current cinema.<sup>26</sup>

When a city is made into a city of a certain faith, in this case Christianity, then there is a concern that this expresses homogeneity or a monolithic reality, which goes against the grain of our current privileging of diversity. Arcand’s world may be dual but it is not hybrid. His Montreal is heavily Francophone. But, it may be argued, so was Jerusalem a heavily Jewish city in the Roman occupation period and the biblical story is told within that community’s life and within that historical moment. Montreal was originally a French creation like Jerusalem was a Jewish creation but like all cities it underwent historical transformation. When Montreal was captured by the English, as Jerusalem was captured by the Romans, the stories of each city became varied and multiple. But no one need feel that the telling of one aspect of the city’s reality is necessarily a diminishment of other aspects. That single aspect is a doorway into a certain reality. Arcand has sought to raise Montreal from a sociological statement to a moral one that encompasses every one, even if it comes from one community. When the priest asks Daniel, the actor, to “update” the Passion Play he gets exactly what he asked for and the film becomes its own “update” because Daniel becomes a Christ-like embodiment. But the curious aspect of this is that the film involves a return to purer forms, whether real or imagined. The film is sent back into the past in a moral way in order to make itself relevant. It is this reverse movement that makes the film so successful. By going into several different pasts (biblical, Quebec, Arcand’s) the film becomes filled with meaning. It achieves in its story what the priest wanted only for the play, which became against his desire threatening to the established order. All of this is worked out in the binaries that Arcand inhabits as a Francophone migrant to a Francophone Quebec and which he has ingested.

### Arcand and Urbanity

Arcand’s urbanity and the urban space of Montreal that he inhabits in his film is only one of numerous inhabitations. The power of his presentation of the city as a site of human conflict comes from his being a migrant from a world that has mostly disappeared. His inherited piety met

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<sup>26</sup> La Rochelle, *Denys Arcand*, 281.

its first major secular test in that urban space and resulted in the birth of a different morality that judged the old inadequate and barren. The religious baggage he carried with him to the city, which he never totally jettisoned, was the way to the sacral. Like luggage it sat stored away until it was time to fill it. Arcand recreated a mythological Quebec that expressed the evolution of his own people in a way that could be understood by them, and also appreciated by those who had not undergone that evolution.

In terms of spatiality, visuality and orality, Arcand's urbanity is one that raises spatial practice and representational spaces (e.g. the basilica) to a moral equivalency, where they signify different moral attributes such as hypocrisy. The visuality of the film represents ironic situations and a judgmental tension as the camera sets up scenes of conflict between place and space, public roles and private actions, religious signifiers and urban signs. The orality of the film contrasts the disembodied economy of language used by the Jesus character with the natural excitement and involvement in the moment of the rest of the cast. Among the cultural grammars that play a prominent role in defining the film are gender, national identity, religion, generation, and, of course, genre. The film is a male film based on a male-authored text, written and directed by a male auteur with a male lead that holds the camera on himself. The Christian narrative of the film is overly evident and its Francophone universe is almost all-encompassing. Arcand made this film when he was middle-aged (late forties) and it represents a certain maturity and gravitas that suits the dramatic genre that he uses. The highly symbolic nature of this religious film also works in the dramatic mode, where each scene has the potential to be constructed as carrying portent and meaning. As for the multidisciplinary characteristics of the film the most significant is likely history. The scholar Jim Leach views Arcand's work as infused with historical sensibility.<sup>27</sup> But this infusion is highly philosophical in its end result. One might also say that architecture and fine arts are supporting elements, especially in regard to Shakespeare's comment on life as a stage and all of us actors upon it. Arcand's reflections on theatrical performance in the film are a commentary on both film and the human condition.

The richness of Arcand's urbanity, framed as it is by contemporary urban life as a site of the sacred, is steeped in the religiosity of Quebec's past, as well as his own. No other Canadian filmmaker has come even close to achieving such a mythological statement in an urban film as

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<sup>27</sup> Leach, *Film in Canada*, 114.

Arcand has in *Jésus*. It is likely that the polarities of past (Jerusalem and Catholic Quebec) and present (a secularized Montreal) are what give the film its electric energy and spiritual depth. Arcand's migrant urbanity has raised the city in this film to new heights of meaning, far beyond the Quebec nationalist cultural center that it is. He has given it biblical proportions and in so doing he has in a metaphoric way resurrected it from a secular death and associated it with a sense of universal significance.