

# The Empire of the Status Quo

## on *The Decline of the American Empire*<sup>1</sup>

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“Brilliant, funny, an undisputed success” reads the press release on Denys Arcand’s latest film. Add to that: masterful dialogue, marvellous performances, superb photography, excellent editing. The real issue in this film is not the story as one might think, but rather the relationships between men and women. In this respect it concerns everyone. Moreover, when a film like this creates such havoc at the box office and wins all kinds of foreign awards, it is inevitable that some day someone should want to examine its limitations and analyse the director’s point of view.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to get a grip on this film in order to analyse it. In fact, its humorous style demands that its audience show enough sense of humour to suspend their critical faculties which, under the circumstances, could be the sign of peevishness. The juxtaposition of academic discussion with its tone of gravity and the comic repartee which it seems to stress, indeed to guarantee without the connection always being obvious, adds ambiguity to the film’s sacrosanctness. In short, there is confusion regarding the fact that the suppositions — which belong, on the one hand to reality, on the other hand to fantasy — are closely intermingled.

One of many different possible perspectives could be privileged: audio-visual art, official history, sociology, etc. It is as a concerned woman, however, that *I* try to understand what sort of empire is involved here. Is it not largely a question of the empire of men over women? If so, can one speak of a decline? Because of its fundamental ambiguity, this film can only unfold within the categorical status quo of male fantasies and the closed sphere of women’s alienation. It would appear this is where the *limitations* of the film and of the director’s conscience lie. As an astute historian, the director is aware of feminism and devotes much effort in responding to it, all the while not letting a single hint of feminist

conscience show through. Whatever his project, he has reproduced all the clichés of sexual politics and reintroduces sexism from the beginning through to the end. In this sense his film is both ideological and tautological. In order to shed some light on these limitations it is necessary to question, in particular, the notions of *power* and *victim* which are inscribed in the film, as well as the respective natures of the *sex jokes* made by *both* sexes.

The real cause of the decline of an empire is stated at the beginning of the film by a male character and is underlined by Arcand himself during an interview — which shows just how seriously he takes it: *historically, the accession of women to power marks the beginning of the fall of civilizations*. Although this insidious theory passes almost unnoticed, the remainder of the film tends to provide the proof, in the ambivalent mode that characterizes this film. The thesis of accession of women to power is a myth: this has never taken place in the past, no more than in the present. Even the exceptions aren't really exceptions because it is always a patriarchal power to which women gain access. The accession of women to power cannot therefore constitute an historic fact recognized in the study of fallen civilizations. Moreover, one could question the validity of the existence of these civilisations. The vocal evocation of the "degeneration of the elite" which accompanies their fall, implies that these empires (all of them patriarchal) are benevolent and should be left standing.

The female character who embodies this theory in the film is head of the department of history and has just published a book. Her treatise reflects male beliefs on the subject. For example, she says when empires decline, people think only of their private life. In addition to devaluing that life, this assertion is in contradiction to the 1968 principle that feminism made its own, namely that the private is political. On the other hand, her colleagues' attitude toward her book is, by her own admission, condescending, because both of them have slept with her. Here we can see the male fantasy about the intellectually "liberated woman" in action: regain control of this woman who is escaping from them, make her lose hold through sexual pleasure (cf. their fantasy of screwing Susan Sontag); and since they have already left their mark on her, her own signature on a book becomes worthless. Finally, this character suffers an affective deficiency and complains of the solitude that she has not chosen but to which she has resigned herself in order to be able to pursue a career. How can we believe that this woman has acceded to any kind of power?

There is also the issue of *power of the victim* in this film. The accession of women to this “power” would be another way for them to liberate themselves. Here we witness the subtle and pernicious reversal of our concept of the condition of women: their “normal” situation as victim is transposed onto a different plane, one that is acceptable, thanks to their proclaimed consent. Here the victim is the *toy* of an external force to which she surrenders with irresistible abandon: she is the individual offering herself as a sacrifice to the god who wants to enslave her in exchange for a promise of orgasmic ecstasy. As a toy she is an incarnation of a scale model of “the Woman,” the life-size model being far too threatening. . . . In reality sexual masochism (see Masoch) is not characteristic of the female; it is a behavioural pattern that is sometimes found among male homosexuals. Yet the female characters of the film are cast in this mold; we see them seeking out the same humiliating situations, showing the irresponsibility of being. The thesis of the “willing victim who has the power” is another myth, and a persistent one. It is found in pornography. It is used to justify the violent reality imposed on women. It dismisses reality and establishes fantasy in its place.

In stating specifically “it’s a game,” the masochistic, intellectual female character\* gives credence to this double deception, namely that women need to be beaten and raped in order to enjoy sexual pleasure and that men willingly fill this role of torturer. Her words describing as a “*real man*” the male who whips, binds and fucks her, as well as her confession “I had never come like that,” contrast the original way of making love (under torture) with that colourless and ridiculous manner preferred by ordinary women, the “old ladies” with their “little female fantasies” edged with tenderness that a male protagonist disdainfully describes. It seems hardly logical that this autonomous and apparently well-balanced woman — she detests being victimized by the double workload that impedes her professional life — would trade the moral suffering forced on her by a husband she sensibly left for the ill treatment inflicted by a sadistic lover. One can’t help but wonder what power she gains in the exchange. That’s why her masochism lacks credibility.

The two remaining female characters are powerless victims. The servile wife is the victim of innumerable betrayals by the man in whom she has placed all her trust; her almost unbelievable naiveté — considering her relationships with women — leads her to believe that lesbianism is an illness one can contract during a nervous breakdown. But above all, her blindness and her perpetual good mood are part of

\*Here Bersianik refers to a second female character, the part-time lecturer. E.G.

the panoply of male fantasies. Fickle husbands tied to their families, they all have the same dream: that their wife notice nothing and always behave nicely toward them. As for the prostitute student, she is the victim of a societal structure that leaves her little choice as to how to pay for her studies. A sort of occidental geisha, she has the “power” to make the professor climax while obviously enjoying no such pleasure herself. Talking incessantly during the “massage” that she practices with total detachment, without feeling in the least degraded, she remains silent and completely obliterated in the company of the others, so much so that one would think she has no existence outside the brothel. Which proves full well that she too is nothing but a fantasy and has no counterpart in reality. Real prostitutes aren’t able to practice their trade without drugs.

To illustrate my point I refer to Andrea Dworkin who established a very important distinction between *fantasy* and *symbol*. All sexual representation that expresses the dominating “relationship of [. . .] men to [. . .] women [. . .] is not fantasy; it is symbol, meaningful because it is rooted in reality.”<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, whatever expresses a certain imaginary relationship between the sexes (the woman who likes to prostitute herself or whom prostitution leaves indifferent, the woman who consents to rape or torture, or even the SS which flogs its victim, the Amazon who crushes balls, the liberated woman who castrates the male) belongs in the realm of fantasy, not symbol: “the power attributed to her nowhere resonates in the real world.”<sup>3</sup>

While the producer gives the floor to imaginary women, his male characters are not fantasized by the women because they (i.e. the men) are symbolic. They cling to their fiction and they express the complete range of sexist sentiments. The homosexual embodies the age-old disgust toward the female genitalia; screwing geisha-style embodies men’s contempt for women and flaunts an almost unbearable sense of self-importance; the husband is the incarnation of the patriarchal system’s hypocrisy. One gets the impression that the innocent youth belongs to the right school of thought; he already behaves “like a man,” taking lessons from an experienced woman. As for the sadistic ignoramus, he embodies the violence done to women, as well as the superiority of the uncultured macho male over the educated woman. None of the male protagonists is a victim, not even the homosexual who may be afflicted with aids: he is well aware that is the risk involved in the “cruising” he can’t do without. If he is a victim, it is his choice. And if he and the others find themselves alone, it is because that is what they have chosen. They are *winners*.

Let us now turn to the sex jokes which are as much a part of the women as of the men, thereby giving the impression that their respective content is equivalent while in fact it is marked by the usual *double standard*. It is noteworthy that in cracking these jokes the men generalize by implicating all women, whereas the women speak of this or that in particular — the honour of other men is spared.

The type of misogynous conversation among men is plausible; it occurs frequently in films. And the fact that it takes place *in the absence of women* renders impossible any riposte by the women. It is here that masculine language is the most macho, here that the humour is the most caustic, that the women are most sharply put in their place. It is known that humour, insofar as it expresses the sexual content of the subconscious (Freud), permits an attack on others, openly expressing hostility, while aligning the targets to one's own advantage, for laughter is a wink of the eye which creates complicity and because of this allows for its own absolution. Dominant in male jokes is disgust for the female genitalia, shared in unison by the chorus of heterosexuals with their homosexual pal, as in the good old days of priests and Jesuits — puritanism is not dead. By associating menstruation with V.D. the prevailing idea that women contaminate men is perpetuated, for there is no question of the reverse. "To think you actually dip your cock in that," says the aids candidate, up to his elbows in dough, not for a moment considering that his own very active cock is probably infected. Not a single male joke is made about that! Instead of bursting out laughing the audience pities his plight.

While the men systematically denigrate the clitoris — it's an almost insurmountable task to bring it to orgasm, it's so tiny — women magnify the penis as being *the* important element in screwing. Their sex jokes, manifestly inspired by the male dread of failing to measure up, deal solely with the dimensions of the penis, i.e. the image that men have of their virility to begin with. At no time do we hear the women say they are disgusted at the thought that these things full of germs (and which pee to boot) dare to plunge into their private parts. Men shouldn't be offended by these words *if they have a sense of humour*. But such jokes are unthinkable on the screen, because men would not tolerate them. Some people have a sense of humour that is different from what they expect of others. . . .

The subliminal message of this film is that nothing has changed after all these years of feminism, even though we thought differently. Therein lies the secret to some of its success and, no doubt, its novelty. It reassures men — here and elsewhere — in their relationships with women while giving them a clear conscience.

I have not written these few comments to discredit Arcand as a film-maker, no more than the recognition of misogyny among the great authors detracts from their genius — that is part of male supremacy. At best this realization enables us to see that modern man has not yet identified the ancient blind spot which obliterates the feminine in his field of vision. But perhaps before the end of this millenium he will witness the decline of his own empire over women. And perhaps he will see that the power to which they accede will not be the kind he had imagined by the name of “power of the victim.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This review first appeared in *Le Devoir*, on the front page of le cahier culturel, August 9, 1986.

<sup>2</sup>Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography, Men Possessing Women*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1981, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 30.