French Canadian film deflates human relationships

THE DECLINE OF THE AMERICAN EMPIRE
Written and directed by Denys Arcand. Starring Dominique Michel, Dorothee Berryman, Louise Portal, Genevieve Rinex, Pierre Curzi, Rémy Girard, Yves Jacques, Daniel Briel, and Gabrielle Arcand.

At the Nickelsdome and Harvard Square.

BY PETER DUNN

AFTER WINNING SEVERAL MAJOR AWARDS AT THE CANADIAN AND OTHER FESTIVALS, THE FRENCH CANADIAN film "Decline of the American Empire" has finally made its way to Boston, despite playing in theaters north of the border for several months now.

In spite of what the title might bring to mind, namely some gentle or not so gentle poking by Canadians at American culture, "Decline" is far from suggesting that the United States is falling a major force in world affairs. Far from it, this new film from veteran French Canadian writer/director Denys Arcand deals more with the decline of the value of relationships in the American "empire," of which Canada (though on the cankiroir) is also considered a part.

"Decline" has often been labelled by film reviewers as "The Big Chill" for intellectuals but, although similarities exist, the differences seem a total reversal of roles. Whereas the latter film defined its characters by who they were (townschildren of the sixties) and what they had become (yuppies, or put it bluntly, "Decline") defines its characters by who they are (mostly professors and students from the history department of the University of Montreal) and where they believe they are going.

But more importantly than what its characters are defined, it is how its characters are defined that makes "Decline" different from "The Big Chill." Although "Big Chill" was very much a summer film, chronicling the weekend of a group of university chums brought together by the suicide of a mutual friend, the problems faced were very much external. "The Big Chill" concerned itself with how its characters had coped with a cold, cruel world and with showing how much friendship played a part in dealing with the decline of "The Big Chill" told the story of a small lifeboat of comrades engulfed by an immense sea of troubles.

In stark contrast, the characters in "Decline" define themselves. It is an obvious matter that the majority are history professors and hence have a distinct sense of destiny, particularly their own. Again the setting of the film is a gathering of friends, but the feeling is far more internal, the troubles which plague the characters being motivated by the deception and distrust within their own group. The characters of "The Big Chill" were confused by where they were going but if they had had any of the insight of the characters of "Decline," they would have been no less pleased.

The self containment of "Decline" is further emphasized by the recursive structure of the film. While history is undeniably defined by life, life as seen by the characters emulates history. Again and again words spoken by these professors of history as matters of intellectual discussion come back to haunt them in life.

The film opens with a subjective camera shot as one of the professors eyes a female student while matter-of-factly stating that, "History is not a moral science." The sub title links the second major ray of the point of the characters in the film is here quickly established through vision and sound, "Sex/hate in the social relationship." With this brief introduction establishing history and art as two of the main topics, the film seques into a long tracking shot down a particularly immense but barren corridor with a solitary rollercoaster traversing its length like a tune of Handel. The shot and music convey the austerity of the immense buiding with the rollercoaster putting those into the context of a society too hurried to notice the decaying beauty around it. This long sequence is at one time intriguing and at another time maddening.

This sense of fascination mingled with uneasiness continue through the entire film beginning as Denonciate (Dominique Michel) discusses her theory espoused in her thesis and the proofs she uses to back it up. This theory is brought up very humorously during the first half of the film as the women, working out at a gymnasium at the university, discuss (quite graphically) how Nazi functionaries - whose combined testimony amounts to one of the most shocking human documents ever recorded - came back to haunt them in life. The self containment of 'Decline" is demonstrated as the audience itself is drawn into the internal machinations.

One of the indications of the decline which Dominique brings up in her theory is that love and marriage are no longer considered means of sustaining the human race (as once exemplified by arranged weddings) but are now considered means of self fulfillment (thence the increasing rate of divorce with the disillusionment in love). This point is brought up very humorously during the first half of the film as the women, working out at a gymnasium at the university, discuss (quite graphically) how Nazi functionaries - whose combined testimony amounts to one of the most shocking human documents ever recorded - come as the men "shadow" disco while blurting out in mock Franglais all the insane ostentations that must be used to pick up young women at dance clubs. The scene leaves the audience rolling in the aisles, laughing so hard their bellies hurt, although unless one is bilingual some of the minimalist English and French/Quebecois are lost in the subtitles.

Just as the history defines the characters, the characters define themselves. (Please turn to page 7)

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