

# THE POSTMODERN BARBARIAN INVASIONS IN CONTEMPORARY DAYS

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## Resumen

En este trabajo, examino las invasiones bárbaras como se presenta en la película de Denys Arcand, donde se observa (1) cómo las invasiones se asocian con algunos personajes de la historia, y (2) cómo éstas afectan la relación entre Rémy y los otros personajes. Este análisis considera aspectos de la ciudad de Montreal presentados/criticados en la película de Arcand, como es la decadencia del sistema de salud, y una eventual comparación entre lo que es visto entre el film e lo que pasa en Brasil.

## Abstract

This paper acknowledges the several barbarian invasions pointed out in Arcand's filmic production, analyzing (1) how such invasions are associated to some characters of the plot, and (2) how these invasions affect the relationship between Rémy and the other characters. The analysis will consider aspects about the city of Montreal presented/criticized in Arcand's film, e.g. its decayed public health care system, and eventual comparisons will be developed between what is seen in the film and what happens in Brazil.

"The history of mankind is a history of horrors": this statement is enunciated by the philosopher, poet, and history teacher Rémy, when the protagonist of the film *The Barbarian Invasions* (Arcan,2003) criticizes contemporary society's short memory about past events. He explains that the number of indigenous who died during the conquering of the American continent is neglected even though it is much bigger than the number of people who died in the twentieth century wars. To complement such paradox, Denys Arcand, the director of *The Barbarian Invasions*, brings to surface a recent event, which has been widely discussed in every means of communication: the attack to the World Trade Center in 2001. Scenes of the event are displayed in a TV news show and a professor makes comment about it. This program is being watched by one of the employees in the hospital. The professor affirms that the importance of the terrorist attack to the Twin Towers resides not only in the number of victims and the fact that great part was not American, but also, or mainly, because it demonstrates how terrorists, the postmodern barbarians, were able to get closer and even surpass the frontiers of the empire. They achieved their aim: to attack the heart of the empire. And this event helped to perpetuate the wave of global violence and the "history of horrors".

Linda Hutcheon in *The Canadian Postmodern* affirms that the postmodern world experiences the margin speaking to the "center" (Hutcheon, 1998). There is a sort of dislocation between centers. This situation favors the

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“barbarian invasions”, as marginal cultures are constantly seen under the “central” eyes. Indeed, the event in the US signals the tension created in the globalized era. It also shows the consequences of the expansion of boundaries and intolerance which resulted from the mixing of different cultures that has been in practice since the end of the Cold War. The globalization carries in its own nature the risk of intolerance and disagreements regarding economy, politics and cultural aspects. A single gesture, then, may have distinct interpretations. An example of it was the great repercussion of the cartoons about Islamism published in the end of 2005 in Europe, marked by protests in several cities.

In this context of globalization, seventeen years after the release of *The Decline of the American Empire* (1986), the director Denys Arcand goes back to the scene with the ironic-but-emotional *The Barbarian Invasions*. Some critics argue that, although the characters of *The Decline of the American Empire* are maintained, the second plot is independent from the first one.

In *The Barbarian Invasions*, almost two decades have passed and the mid-aged Rémy, played by Rémy Girard, is in hospital, ill of a rare cancer. In the very first scenes, his millionaire son, Sébastien (played by Stéphane Rousseau) is persuaded by his mother Louise, starring Dorothee Berryman, to travel from London to Montreal in order to visit his father. The relationship between both father and son is the one of two strangers and this is emphasized since the moment Louise calls Sébastien in London to ask him to travel to Montreal. Some time after he arrives, Sébastien argues with his father about how he has destroyed his family. Sébastien says “I may not know anything. But I’m sure about something: my life won’t be like yours”.

Their constant quarrels added to Rémy’s stubbornness almost make Sébastien return to England. But Louise once again talks to him and convinces him to stay by telling him how Rémy took good care of his children when they were young.

Thus, Sébastien accepts the challenge and decides to stay in Montreal to help his father, no matter how much effort he has to make. For instance, he invites Rémy’s group of eccentric university professors who enjoy the reunion to talk about politics, philosophies of life and about their past of sexual liberation. The latter was the main topic in Arcand’s first movie.

This reunion of the same characters of *The Decline of the American Empire* (1986) may suggest a possible repetition of plots, but Arcand wittily innovates, changing the topics of conversations of the characters. Hence, even though Arcand’s characters are intellectually worried about such worldwide events, they are, at the same time, subjected to minor barbarian invasions, the ones of everyday life as any other citizen in the present world. The tagline of the movie translates it well. It says “A provocative new comedy about sex, friendship, and all other things that invade our lives”.(IMDB,2003)

For this reason, instead of scrutinizing greater invasions of contemporary world presented by the film, in this paper, I chose to focus on the minor barbarians that invade Rémy's last days.

When Sébastien arrives at the hospital where his father is staying, he realizes that this hospital cannot offer proper treatment to Rémy's disease. A nurse tells Sébastien that they cannot make modern X-Ray exams. Arcand takes this opportunity to make a social criticism about the bad conditions of the public health care system in Montreal. Unfortunately, this seems to be a mirror of Brazilian public hospitals. Patients face long lines to get a password for an appointment, doctors go on strikes vindicating for better working conditions, patients are piled up in precarious rooms and even in hospital corridors, etc. Indeed this is not new for us, Brazilians. However, in the film, Sébastien's father declares that he would rather stay in Montreal than being treated in the best hospital in the US. He affirms that he has fought for the nationalization of hospitals and now he has to cope with the consequences. Thus, Sébastien manages to find out a way to give his father a better environment. He talks to the director of the hospital and bribes her in order to transfer Rémy to another floor in the hospital which is empty. His plan is followed by the bribing of the member of the hospital union.

Sébastien's attitude demonstrates how easy corruption may happen. The ones with better financial conditions can receive better treatment even in a public hospital idealized in the modes of socialism. Although Sébastien has good intentions, he has corrupted the system, and this is one of the examples of barbarian invasions: the disguised corruption that has conquered many territories and given privilege to small groups of society.

Sébastien's way of working out the problems clearly shows how different he is from Rémy. Sébastien is a wealthy young man who works as a broker. He depicts the side of capitalism that was successful. Rémy, on the other hand, depicts the image of the brave but poor intellectual, who cares more about ideas and less about money or even family. Nevertheless, Sébastien chooses to help his father and takes another step with his plan. He invites his father's group of friends to come over to the hospital. Two of these friends are Rémy's ex-lovers, who stand for the other barbarians displayed in the film: the "intruders" of families. Sébastien blames Rémy for having destroyed their family with so many affairs throughout the time he was married. The film shows the consequences to the lives of the children whose parents took part in the movements of the sixties. The parents that preached sexual liberation are now criticized by their children who cannot stand the consequences of their ideologies. Generation gaps are aggravated by the irresponsibility of parents. For that reason, Sébastien and his sister Sylvaine (Isabelle Blais) have chosen to live away from their parents and they have taken totally different paths.

Moreover, the presence of the two mistresses is already awkward, but this odd situation is increased by Louise's behavior. Rémy's ex-wife seems at ease with the presence of the two ladies, even knowing about the betrayals. Arcand's satirical tone to the drama makes it a French-like movie opposite to the Hollywoodian style. French cinema is more obvious and bold when showing

polemical subjects whereas Hollywoodian films tend to be less straightforward because of censorship. And this sort of open-minded way of dealing with polemical subjects is also present in another situation in the movie.

Sébastien is told that the use of heroin could decrease Rémy's physical pain since it is stronger than morphine. Then, Diane (played by Louise Portal), who is one of Rémy's ex-lovers, tells Sébastien that her daughter Nathalie (Marie-Josée Croze) can provide him with the drug, as her daughter is addicted to it.

Marie-Josée Croze enters the scene and conducts it to both drama and tension. She has acted in the Canadian *Ararat* (2002) and in Steven Spielberg's *Munich* (2005). Some critics believe that great part of the success of *The Barbarian Invasions* is due to her interpretation. Indeed, she won four awards as Best Actress for her participation in *The Barbarian Invasions*.

Nathalie also stands for the children born after the sixties generation. She feels as dislocated as Sébastien and Sylvaine and, for that reason, she lets herself to submit to another barbarian invasion in contemporary world: drugs. In *The Barbarian Invasions*, she plays the role of Rémy's drug source. She introduces him to the use of heroin and applies the shots.

However, meanwhile, both characters develop long talks. And the magic of Croze's interpretation is exactly in such talks. They are, at first, at two sides of a coin: whereas Rémy is sick to death but is eager to live, Nathalie is young and full of life, but wants to escape reality, risking her life each time she has an overdose.

Another contradiction between them is in the fact that Rémy is older than Nathalie and has, therefore, more experience about life, but ends up to learn important lessons with this young woman.

As she applies the shots of heroin, Nathalie decreases Rémy's level of consciousness, but, paradoxically, she also plays the role of his consciousness. She asks intriguing questions to Rémy based on a humanistic approach. Though Nathalie is the mediator of the barbarian (the "drug"), she is the only one able to face Rémy, confronting his intellectuality with his actual situation. She is the only one who helps him accept his present and let go his past. She tells him once: "It's not your present life that you don't want to lose, but it's you past, and you can't have it anymore". She helps Rémy to understand his son and accept him the way he is. By the end of the film, Rémy and Sébastien talk and become friends.

And Nathalie also learns a lesson. She apparently changes her mind about being addicted to drugs by the end of the movie. She becomes confident about herself and rehearses an approximation to her mother from whom she had been long time apart.

Arcand's way of presenting all these minor barbarian invasions to one's life naming them corruption, breaking of familiar bonds, drugs, etc, is done

under a relativistic way. Arcand provides, through Rémy's situation, the postmodern relative way of judging reality. Every invasion brings a positive and a negative side with it. The movie illustrates that the characters are aware of the consequences of such barbarian invasions – they even suffer with the invasions such as in Nathalie's case, because she is always close to an overdose. However, the Canadian filmmaker also shows how postmodern society has learnt to live despite such invasions. Sébastien's bribing increases the social differences in the hospital but it works to help his father. The decaying of Rémy's family helps Sébastien value his fiancée and his role in the family he is going to constitute. Also, through one of the intruders, Sébastien is able to get the heroin for Rémy. And the drugs help Rémy to get to know Nathalie.

This relativistic point-of-view may lead to the danger of accepting invasions as something always "good". For instance, overlook corruption and bribe that favor certain groups, or assume the use of drugs as something harmless. Arcand has run the risk of misinterpretation, but as a French-like movie, he changes the perspective and opts to show how characters have learnt to live and deal with these postmodern invasions. Although *The Barbarian Invasions* is a film whose plot can be summarized as the last days of a sick patient, it does not have the tone of a sorrowful drama. Rather, it has a certain level of humor. Some passages are hilarious, and they are always related to the invasions, as if the characters are giving lessons about how to deal with such situations.

One of these scenes is when Sébastien goes to the police station and asks the officers to provide him with some names of drug suppliers so that he could easily have the heroin to treat his father's sickness. The officer, astonished at first, answers that his job is to look for such suppliers, not to make it easier for consumers to find them!

Another passage is when Rémy enters the body scanner and asks Sébastien if he knows the saying "Christmas in the scanner, Easter in cemetery". His way of dealing with his disease seems to decrease the dramatic situation of fighting against a barbarian in his own body.

*The Barbarian Invasions* has won many awards, including the Oscar for Best Foreign Film, two Golden Palms and the Brazilian award for Best Foreign Film. This success is explained by Arcand's way of raising social awareness without being sorrowful or demagogic.

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