

Denys Arcand: Three Documentaries

Metro Cinema Publications, Number One

Denys Arcand: Three Documentaries

Schedule of Screenings:

28 June 2004, 7pm: *Comfort and Indifference*

12 July 2004, 7pm: *Québec: Duplessis and After*

19 July 2004, 7pm: *Cotton Mill, Treadmill*

All films will be shown at Ziedler Hall, Citadel Theatre, 9828-101A Avenue, Edmonton.

All films will be shown on 16mm.

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Introduction

Metro Cinema is quite pleased to be able to present this screening of Denys Arcand's documentaries. Although he's well known as one of Québec's most successful feature filmmakers, Arcand is not well known as a documentarian at all. That is too bad, not only because his documentaries are so interesting on their own, but also because they shed so much light on his fiction films.

Indeed, there is quite a close connection between the films in this programme and Arcand's feature films. Arcand's fiction film *Gina* (1976) is about a bunch of idealistic filmmakers who go to a small Québec town to make a film about cotton mills and end up having all sorts of problems with their employers, the "Office National du Cinéma" (the real French name of the NFB is the Office National du Film). This is a barely-concealed evocation of Arcand's real-life experience filming *On est au coton*, a film that was, at the time of *Gina*'s release, still shelved by the NFB, who refused to release it for political reasons. The lead filmmaker in *Gina* is even played by Denys Arcand's brother Gabriel. Arcand's fiction film *Réjeanne Padovanni* (1973) was made right after the release of his documentary *Québec: Duplessis et après*, and he has said that a lot of the ideas for that fiction film came from the casual discussion among politicians and their bodyguards of corruption that he observed while making that documentary film. And the defeated cynicism of *Le confort et l'indifférence* is a preview of the indulgent, post-referendum, Quiet-Revolution-babies that populated *Le déclin de l'empire américain* (1986), made five years later.

So we hope that these screenings will offer an opportunity to understand just how original and flexible a filmmaker Denys Arcand is. *Bon cinéma, et bonne lecture.*

On est au coton

English Title: *Cotton Mill, Treadmill*

Denys Arcand, 1971 (released 1976)

By Leanne OLSON

Penmans is a household name, known for its line of cotton underwear. Directed by Denys Arcand, *On est au coton* (a colloquialism meaning “we’re fed up”) explains the profit-driven organisational chart that the underwear company exists under. In 1968, Penmans parent company, Dominion Textiles, made an executive decision to reorganise operations and close six cotton mills. Arcand explores the effect of this decision on the Penmans mill located in Coaticook Quebec and focuses on the lowest rung of the org chart: the penciled in mechanics and seamstresses.

The camera follows the mechanics and seamstresses through a typical day of work at the mill, spending lengthy shots without dialogue on the intricate process of creating cotton underwear. The thunder of the machinery is overwhelming and eyebrows are furrowed with intense concentration on the fabric beneath the sewing machine. Arcand also brings the camera into the workers apartments and rental houses, watching seamstress Carmen Bertrand eat dinner at a table for one, and then set her alarm clock for the next mundane day.

Seamstress Carmen and mechanic Bertrand Saint-Onge are not highly educated and are shocked with Dominion Textiles’ executive decision. Unfortunately for the citizens of Coaticook, Penmans’ cotton mill was a source of employment for generations. Many of the workers aged 40-45 have a grade 2 or 3 education, as they began to work at the mill as early as age 9. Economist Claude Lemelin extends the importance of the industry to the province as a whole; cotton mills were Quebec’s first major

manufacturing industry at the end of the nineteenth century. The mills required abundant employees to run the equipment and were a prosperous, self-sufficient industry for Quebec and eastern Canada. By exploring the history impact of the industry on the worker, town and province, *On est au coton* offers an analysis of the executive decisions as they trickle down the org chart.

The decision for the Coaticook factory closure is made in Dominion Textile's headquarters in Montreal, where Penmans rising deficits are the focal issue. Interrupting the film is a black screen in place of interviews Arcand took with Eddy King, President and CEO of Dominion Textile Co. (after seeing the film, King ordered all footage of him taken out). The management's version of the closure is summarised in a business overview of Penmans, written by Professor B.J. Austin of Brock University:

In 1964, Penmans largest share holder, Dominion Textiles was developing aggressive manufacturing and marketing strategies to meet the onslaught of low-priced foreign imports by operating in most textile sectors in Canada. Dominion's new president, E.F. King, decided to take charge of Penmans . . . Operations were reorganised to improve productivity, reduce costs, and introduce better work methods. The product line was rationalised, and high-speed equipment purchased. The Waterford plant was closed in 1964, London in 1967, **Coaticook** in 1968, most of St. Hyacinthe in 1975, as well as two of the Paris mills, in 1970 and 1972, leaving, by 1975, one fabric producing, dyeing and finishing plant at Paris, and cut and sew operations at St. Hyacinthe and Brantford.¹

Dealing with the implications of the operational reorganisation is the layoff committee, responsible for

securing the futures of Coaticook factory employees. Penmans management representatives' referral to the staff as "inventory" chronicles the inability of these reps to grasp the implications of the closure on the workers. The layoff committee meetings are filmed briefly and hopelessly, juxtaposed to hopeful employees, who entrust the committee with their livelihood. The meetings conclude and the outcomes are employment opportunities in English speaking provinces and no compensation pay. The film then cuts to a subsequent meeting of the disillusioned employees realizing their grim prospects and the insignificance of challenging Dominion's decision.

Arcand introduces Madelaine Parent, a union striker who sought to stir up the profit seeking org chart and increase the standards for workers. However, Parent was involved in strikes against Dominion Textiles in 1946 and 1947. Parent faced many barriers in attaining a uniform wage schedule for workers- with the support of the government and police, those willing to accept the poor working conditions (scabs) were escorted to work in armoured vehicles. Parent was arrested multiple times and fellow union supporters were referred to as communists. Opposed to equality, Dominion Textiles distributed propaganda threatening that if the workers asked for too much, the factories would move elsewhere and the workers would be unemployed.

By 1968, Dominion Textiles did not need propaganda and the workers in Coaticook needn't put up a fight. The lack of specialisation required in the textile industry was inspiring the factories to move elsewhere. Any person can be trained to use a sewing machine and many persons overseas were able to produce garments for \$3 instead of \$13. By the late sixties, Quebec cotton mill workers were in no position to request higher working standards, let alone a job.

Finishing the film is a typewritten statement: "Machines are the most efficient political instrument."

Throughout *On est au coton* cameras survey the layers upon layers of fabric that the machines neatly fold and mould. Occasionally these lengthy shots are interjected with the blustering noise of the machinery, reminding us of the inhumane working conditions behind the mesmerising, revenue-driven machinery. When the Coaticook mill finally does close, the large lone sewing machines are filmed in the vacant mill like they are sculptural installations in a gallery, exhibiting the quiet displacement of the undervalued workers.

The appropriately titled business overview of Penmans (“Stick to the Knitting”) by B.J. Austin, offers a follow-up on Penmans when Eddy King, Dominion Textiles President and CEO, retired in 1975:

The DomTex executives realised that Penmans’ products were getting lost in the larger Consumer Products division. Penmans was restructured as a separate company in order to revive its activities. A Dominion Textile executive, Harry Braid, was appointed president. In 1981, the Cambridge, Ontario, plant of Celanese Canada Inc. was purchased, and all Penmans operations were moved there in order to reduce inter-plant transportation and to improve the process flow, and product and quality control. The plants in Paris (1869), Brantford (1873), and St. Hyacinthe (1882) were closed.

In spite of the cotton mill closures, Penmans remains a household name and has been swallowed-up in the org chart of Wal-Mart:

When Wal-Mart expanded into Canada, and shortly became the country’s largest retailer, it purchased the Penmans brand (that John Penman had first sold in 1906) in order to give the illusion of a Canadian brand. The

“Penmans Since 1868” label is one of several house brands that includes B.U.M., Ash Creek Trading, 725 Originals, and Sasson. Once again the Penmans name appears on hosiery and underwear, as well as men’s, women’s, and children’s clothing, and footwear. Wal-Mart, under the Penmans brand, commissions garments from Canadian and offshore manufacturers. A check of the CA numbers in various items shows that the hosiery is manufactured by Lamour Hosiery Inc., Montreal, and the underwear by St. Giles, Quebec. Other Penmans’ brand items indicate they were manufactured in Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Korea, Vietnam, and Malaysia.²

Industrial workers in Canada continue to struggle with the merciless motives of profitable conglomerates and cheap consumers. Twenty years later Madeline Parent was still speaking out; in a 1988 interview entitled “Usurping The Reign of The Favorites,” she discussed the impact of the free trade deal on Canadian industry:

CHRISTINA: Do you see any job creation coming out of the free trade deal?

MADELEINE: Very, very little. They tell us we will have a chance to “make it” in the American market. But all of that is part of the race and tough competitive struggle of corporations. Large US corporation want our natural resources: oil and gas, hydro, forestry, minerals. There are comparatively few jobs for us in those areas. The US doesn’t need our manufacturing plants, except to buy those they don’t own already in order to shut them down later, knocking out a competitor.³

Following its completion, Arcand’s *On est au coton* was shelved by the NFB until 1976 (filmed from 1968-1970,

it was completed just after the October Crisis, a period of tremendous sensitivity about radical political action). The org chart Arcand presented, heavily siding with the lowest rung and exposing the impacts of questionable adjustments on the highest, was controversially accurate. Unfortunately, the org chart Arcand presented is even more accurate today, in an age of corporations fuelled by profit-seeking conglomerates and bargain-hunting consumers. Upon seeing Arcand's slow exploration of the cotton treadmill and the faces behind the machinery, any cotton consumer will begin to question the circular cycle of poor working conditions and increasing profit margins.

Notes:

1. Also listed in the business overview of Penmans is a description of the management shuffle when King became President and CEO in 1964- King became president of both Penmans and Dominion, Penmans' initial board of five directors (two from Dominion and three from Penmans' operations) was expanded to nine, all from the Dominion board except for one man from Penmans' executive and three new vice presidents were appointed.

2. Both quotes are from B.J. Austin, "Stick to the Knitting" (Faculty of Business, Brock University, 2001), found at <http://www.valt.helsinki.fi/yhis/ebha2002/papers/austin.pdf> on 16 June 2004.

3. Christina Starr, "Usurping The Reign of The Favorites: Interview with Madeleine Parent," *Women's Education des Femmes* 6:3 (Summer 1988). Also found at http://www.nald.ca/canorg/cclow/newslet/1988/Sumer_v6/10.htm on 16 June 2004.

Québec: Duplessis et après
English Title: Quebec: Duplessis and After
Denys Arcand, 1972

By Jerry WHITE

One great thing about looking at Denys Arcand's early documentaries is that you get to see him as a young person, someone excited by politics, by history, and the possibilities of cinema. But Arcand's is an odd form of enthusiasm. He's all too aware of the problems that had come to seem endemic to Québec society, and wants his viewer to be aware of these sorts of problems too, to *really* feel just how rotten Québec society had become. We see this combination of enthusiasm and cynicism in the way that *On est au coton* uses highly self-conscious cinematic techniques (very long takes, insanely loud noise on the soundtrack, occasional use of black screen, sections separated by titles typed out on a typewriter, etc.). We even see it in *Le confort et l'indifférence*, with its insistence that we think of the failed 1980 Québec referendum in terms of Renaissance politics (that film is narrated by an actor – Jean-Pierre Ronfard – playing Machiavelli).

But nowhere do we see Denys Arcand the student of history, Denys Arcand the political filmmaker, more than in his 1972 film *Québec: Duplessis et Après*. This is the film where Arcand lays out his “grand unifying theory” of Québec culture, where he really does try to come to grips with what is holding Québec back. We see him do this in a couple of ways. Overall, his analysis of the Québec political scene is basically *plus ça change, plus la même chose*; this meant he was quite a wet blanket given that the film was made in 1970, by which time Québec's beloved Quiet Revolution should have run its course and transformed the society. And he tells his viewer *plus ça change* by using editing as his stylistic technique of choice; there

are some nicely composed documentary images in this film, but mostly it's about juxtaposition, about what the great Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein would recognise as montage. We also see plenty of the artificial flourishes that we find in the other two documentaries; *Québec: Duplessis et après* is filled with little moments of high artificiality, forcing the viewer to recognise the film as an *argument*, as a provocation. This is Arcand at his most razor-sharp, and Québec's political cinema at its most historically and aesthetically *engagé*.

Some historical detail is necessary here, for *Québec: Duplessis et après* assumes that the viewer is relatively knowledgeable about Québec politics. The year is 1970, the year of the October Crisis (the election is being held before the Crisis itself, but the FLQ campaign was in full swing). The Québec Liberals – whose leader, Robert Bourassa, had been at the helm during that crisis and whose Labour Minister, Pierre Laporte, had been killed by the FLQ – are contesting an election not only with the new kid on the block, the newly-formed separatist Parti Québécois, but also with old-school populist parties like Social Credit (about whom Albertans need no explanation!) and the Union Nationale, who had defeated the Liberals in 1966 and were the incumbents in the 1970 election. The Union Nationale was once the party of Maurice Duplessis, the corrupt, dictator-like politician who ran Québec from 1935-1959, with a brief period out of power during WWII. The death of Maurice Duplessis in 1959 is generally considered the beginning of the Quiet Revolution, the much-romanticised period of Québec's modernisation. Arcand, then, is always moving between footage of Duplessis (some of it from 1936, when he first came to power) and footage of the current political scene.

The film also prominently features readings from two crucial documents: Lord Durham's 1839 *Report on the Affairs of British North America* (which is read by

filmmaker Robin Spry, who would go on to become famous for his 1973 documentary *Action: The October Crisis of 1970*) and the 1936 “Electoral Catechism” of the Union Nationale (which is read by actress Gisèle Trépanier, who had already been in Arcand’s 1964 film *Champlain* and who would also have a small role in his 1990 film *Jésus de Montréal*). That Catechism was written in the question-and-answer style of Catholic Catechisms, posing more-or-less rhetorical questions (“who created heaven and earth and all things?” is well known to readers of the Baltimore Catechism) by way of educating the faithful. That the Union Nationale would issue its platform in such a format, in a way, says everything you need to know about their political approach. Lord Durham’s report, written in the wake of the 1837-38 *Patriotes* rebellion in what was then Lower Canada, has become a famous exemplar of everything that was arrogant, totalitarian and homogenising about British imperialism. It essentially concluded that the French living in North America were a bunch of irredeemably backward losers, and that their assimilation into the English-speaking majority was the only reasonable strategy for the rulers of British North America. He saw unification of Upper and Lower Canada as the best way to affect such assimilation and guarantee sustainable peace. It bears noting, especially for a film released just two years after the October Crisis, that the FLQ saw themselves as the inheritors of the legacy of the *Patriotes*. Furthermore, Pierre Véronneau has written that “[i]t is important to point out that at the same time Arcand was finishing the fictional part of his shooting [the readings], the October Crisis exploded.”¹

A little more than halfway through the film, there are some very impressive examples of aggressive, polemical editing. Arcand shows us some old newsreel footage of Duplessis in his hometown of Trois Rivières, the voiceover at one point cheerfully proclaiming that the fact that Duplessis is in a boat with a bishop

symbolises the unity of church of state “in the same boat, in the same port.” This is followed by a very quick montage of older footage of Churchmen with political leaders, and more recent footage of Clergy and political leaders; it moves along so quickly that it’s tough to tell which images are from the ’30s and which are from the ’70s. That, of course, is the point; it’s very tough to tell which of these politicians are old-school theocrats and which are self-styled post-Quiet Revolution modernizers. This analysis of history is made via nothing more than editing, which is exactly what the great montage-heads of the silent Soviet cinema thought cinema should be all about. Cut together these two seemingly antithetical images – the politics of the *grand noirceur* of the 1930s and the brave new world of the Quiet Revolution– and you synthesise a new idea, an idea not contained in those images all by themselves.

This kind of polemical edge is visible in different ways, though, particularly in the sections that Véronneau calls “fictional,” the images where people are facing the camera and reading from either Lord Durham’s report or the Union Nationale Catechism. The settings for these readings are often ironic; Lord Durham’s report is usually read in an office, befitting a colonial administrator, while the Electoral Catechism reader gets out a bit, and there is one particularly nice shot on the snowy steps of the Québec Superior Court. But the most striking of all these images is when Gisèle Trépanier reads the Electoral Catechism in an editing room with a young, moustachioed editor sitting in front of a Movieola, staring at the camera and eventually lighting a cigarette, looking bored. The Electoral Catechism passage is about the “dictatorship over opinion” that is supposedly enforced by the media and the government. This passage is followed by Trépanier in a shopping mall; the catechist asks “Are you saying that the people are stupid,” to which Trépanier responds that “the people cannot be stupid,

since it is from the people themselves that have sprung the greatest men, the most famous thinkers, citizens of the greatest strength, courage and character. But it must not be forgotten that all people, any crowd, can easily let itself be leads by false appearances. The people can do nothing without a guide, without a leader.” As we hear these words, she is framed in a very high-angle shot, making her look very small indeed, as the crowd that the Catechism mentions mills about. To move from the editing room right to the shopping mall, linked by text that disingenuously complains about the manipulation of mass public opinion only to lament that the noble people of the greatest strength can do nothing without a leader (gee, who could that *possibly* be?) makes a pretty snarky comment about this sort of boilerplate populism. Arcand knows very well that yesterday’s village square is today’s shopping mall, and that yesterday’s complaints about an elitist media were now being transferred to filmmakers like him. It was all-too-easy to find 1970s equivalents for the vocabulary of the 1930s Unione Nationale; at one point, Arcand needed to look no further than this film itself.

Québec: Duplessis et après, then, deserves a central place in Denys Arcand’s body of work. It’s a film where we find a rigorous, unsparingly critical analysis of Québec’s culture, an analysis that is not afraid to dig around in the history of 19th century imperialism *and* to link it to the home-grown foolishness found in the 1930s. And best of all, it’s a film where that analysis is made in a way that can only be done in film. This intensely critical, intensely cinematic awareness is something that we see throughout Arcand’s early documentaries. We see it nowhere more potently than in *Québec: Duplessis et après*.

Note:

1. Pierre Véronneau, "Alone and with others: Denys Arcand's destiny within the Quebec cinematic and cultural climate," in André Loiseau and Brian McIlroy, eds., *Auteur/Provocateur: The Films of Denys Arcand* (Trowbridge, England: Flicks Books, 1995), p.17.

Le confort et l'indifférence
English Title: *Comfort and Indifference*
Denys Arcand, 1981
(English version released 1991)

By Marsh MURPHY

Until about 1960, the dominant social force in Québec was the Roman Catholic Church, whose control of basic social services, such as schools and hospitals, gave them remarkable political clout. They supported a series of provincial governments, who in turn supported the church with platforms of social and religious conservatism.

In 1960, the Liberal party came to power under Jean Lesage, and the Quiet Revolution began, during which Québec shifted rapidly from religious conservatism into a secular welfare state. Education was vastly improved, natural resources were nationalized, and a strong national identity developed – people began to think of themselves as *Québécois*, rather than *Canadien français*.

René Lévesque, popular Minister of Natural Resources in Lesage's government, left the Québec Liberal Party in 1967 after his attempts to discuss Québec sovereignty were rebuffed during a party convention. Within a year, he had merged the various independence movements into a new political party devoted to Québec sovereignty, the Parti Québécois. Key to their platform was Levesque's idea of "sovereignty-association," under which Québec would be an independent nation (ie., sovereign) that had a special economic relationship with Canada (ie., association), modeled after the emerging European Community. Association was seen as vital by sovereignists because it was predicted that an independent Québec would be financially isolated in North America, and would suffer financial hardship

otherwise. The PQ won only a handful of seats in the next few elections, but in 1976 they surprised everyone by winning a majority government, taking 70 of 110 seats with 41% of the vote.

In the federal elections of 1979 and 1980, Trudeau's Liberals dominated Québec with first 67, then 74 seats out of 75, captured with 62% and 68% of the vote respectively. Following quickly on the heels of the federal election in February 1980, Lévesque called a provincial referendum, seeking permission to negotiate sovereignty-association with Canada. The PQ were seeking permission to negotiate a deal, rather than ratify one, but the Non side was quick to frame the debate as "Leave Canada" vs. "Stay in Canada."

Throughout the campaign, the Oui side appealed to Québécois nationalism, touting the inherent value of an independent Québec. The Non side capitalized on the fears of Québécois, warning them about the financial downside of separation. The Non side won: 59.5% to 40.4%. Lévesque had the same amount of support as had brought them to power in 1976. Despite losing the referendum, the PQ were returned to power in 1981 with 49% of the vote, and 80 of 122 seats. Lévesque did not seek another referendum. Instead, he chose *le beau risque*, working to find a place for Québec within a reformed Canadian federalism.

In 1982, the federal government repatriated the constitution without support from Québec; for the next ten years, nationalist energies were spent on constitutional reform. This led to a rift within the PQ, and René Lévesque retired from politics in 1985. In 1987, he passed away.

It took several years for the Parti Québécois to regain power, but the failures of Meech Lake and the Charlottetown Accord revitalized Québécois nationalism. The PQ formed the government in 1994, and called a second referendum in 1995. The federalists won again, but with a much slimmer margin of victory: 50.5% to 49.4%.

Comfort and Indifference is Denys Arcand's documentary about the 1980 referendum. In place of traditional narration, an actor (Jean-Pierre Ronfard) plays Niccolo Machiavelli and quotes from his works. He begins the film by saying:

There is nothing more difficult, more dangerous to handle, more doubtful of success, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all who profit from the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit.

The documentary footage, gathered by half a dozen NFB cinematographers during the course of the referendum, serves to illustrate Machiavelli's arguments. When he describes the wise actions of a Prince, his words accompany scenes of Trudeau, or his lieutenants on the Non side. Warnings to an unwise Prince are illustrated by Lévesque and the Oui side. And his descriptions of the general public as "ungrateful, fickle, [and] hypocritical" accompany footage of flawed mankind, in public debates, private interviews, and – most scathingly – distracted by bingo and religion, shiny boats and vans.

Machiavelli introduces us to Trudeau by quoting Cicero: "The people... though they may be ignorant, are capable of perceiving the truth when it is presented by a man whom they consider worthy of their trust." This begins a very long scene of Trudeau walking through an adoring crowd. After quite a while, Machiavelli continues, "The Prince has an absolute need of his people's love. Otherwise, he has no support in times of adversity." It is clear that the crowd absolutely adores Trudeau.

A similar scene, a panning shot across a huge arena full of people, all waving "Oui" signs and screaming "Lévesque, Lévesque, Lévesque," is given a different meaning in voiceover: "The Prince deceives

himself who calculates his strength based... on the love of his people... When [danger] approaches, they revolt. The Prince who has relied solely on their words... finds himself ruined.” This sentiment is repeated whenever Lévesque faces a rally of his supporters. From the perspective of Arcand’s Machiavelli, Lévesque is an unwise Prince – he not only trusts the words of the people, but he thinks he can convince them to stray from the status quo.

The task of the Non campaign was easier – they capitalized on the fear and inertia of the citizenry. If things are good, they asked, why change? There’s no guarantee things will get better, and they could get worse. The Non side raised the spectre of pensions and welfare; the cost of tractors, the price of gas, or the financial risk of a sovereign Québec cut off from trade with Canada and the US. “Men forget losing a father faster than losing their money,” says Machiavelli.

Throughout, Arcand edits to expose the political truths he sees throughout the referendum. In a heavy-handed scene with Chrétien, Arcand shows how the Canadian government bought the support of prominent Québécois. A line of Machiavelli’s – “To retain his minister’s loyalty, the Prince will cover him with honours, positions, and wealth” – precedes a scene with Chrétien, cataloguing the positions he has held in the federal government: “Minister for Trade and Commerce, for the Treasury, Minister for Indian Affairs... Minister of Justice, Attorney-General of Canada, and Minister in charge of Constitutional Issues.” From this scene, all Chrétien’s opinions are made suspect.

At times, Arcand’s editing is more playful. In one amusing sequence, Arcand cuts quickly between various dignitaries quoting figures, percentages, amounts. He eliminates the context, and jumps from speech to speech, number to number, reducing the whole to a jumble of meaningless facts and figures. This is followed by a similar scene, which cuts between

a few dozen renditions of “O Canada,” sung by various Non supporters during the campaign. So soon after the first, the suggestion is clear: the Canadian anthem is a meaningless joke in this campaign.

The referendum ends with the Non victory. During Lévesque’s speech on the night of defeat, Arcand repeats Machiavelli’s harshest criticisms: “It is a mistake, in any perilous enterprise, to rely unthinkingly on support and aid from the people.” When Lévesque criticizes the Non campaign as “scandalously immoral,” Machiavelli rebuts: “It is the victory which brings glory to a Prince, not the manner in which it is gained.”

Arcand’s argument is clear, voiced throughout by Machiavelli: the campaign was doomed to failure, and Lévesque misjudged the Québécois. Heartened by the PQ’s rise to power, and by the apparent support of his citizens, Lévesque acted foolishly. He asked a comfortable people, happy with their lot, to “initiate a new order of things.” He asked them to work towards a better life, towards a sovereign nation, but he wasn’t able to compel them towards that choice – he was only able to entreat them. As Machiavelli says for Arcand, “If he must count on entreaties he will invariably succeed ill and accomplish nothing.”

Towards the end of the film, Arcand backs up the basic argument of his title: the people of Québec are comfortable, and therefore indifferent to change. He quotes Machiavelli: “To govern is to ensure that [the life of your subjects] is so comfortable, they want no other.” We are shown various luxuries, comforts, and distractions: floral shows, bingos, religious events, fancy boats – and a van show. Showing the camera crew around his modified van, one man says, “I’ve got everything inside. I added a bar, a sink, a fridge, CB, sound system... double bed, swivel chair... Cost a fortune. But it’s neat.”

Forget the lofty goal of a sovereign nation, Arcand is saying, this guy’s got a neat van. How do you compete with that?

Denys Arcand's Documentaries:

Appuis et Suspensions (1964, 9m) (Wrote the text)

Champlain (1964, 28m)

Québec 1603 - Samuel de Champlain (1964, 14m)

Parallèles et Grand Soleil (1964, 40m) (Wrote the text)

Les Montréalistes (1965, 27m)

La route de l'Ouest (1965, 28m) (Wrote the text)

Volleyball (1966, 9m)

Parcs atlantiques (1967, 17m)

On est au coton (1970, 159m)

Québec : Duplessis et après... (1972, 114m)

Le Confort et l'Indifférence (1981, 108m)

À l'ombre d'Hollywood (2000, 111m)

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