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The Decline of the American Empire

We're losing the battles, losing the war, losing the empire, too

BY ELEANOR MALIN

Written & Directed by: Denys Arcand  
Starring: Rémy Girard, Dominique Michel,  
Louise Portal  
Playing at: The Movie House

First thing in this story, Dominique (Dominique Michel), states in an interview for Diane (Louise Portal), that the American empire is in decline. She points out that whenever a population has "arrived" to the point of its citizenry starting to

when Rémy and Pierre demonstrate the art of disco dancing and making small talk — something they abhor, but must learn to do to court women. "Baryshnikov — fantastic, eh!" — "Acid rain — it's terrible!"

Through skillful intercutting, we see the full extent of the duplicity heterosexual males exercise in the pursuit of casual sex with women; on the other hand, the women reveal the spiteful tricks they play to get even with the men.

When the foursome of history pros and company meet at the country estate where the men have been cooking, they greet each other with rather formal hugs. While each set has been relatively spontaneous and truthful with others of their sex, the mix of males and females causes a complete change in the texture of the proceedings. Men and women can't discuss their innermost feelings and sexual histories together, because their attitudes are light years apart. When Mario, Diane's bad and mean-looking boyfriend, breaks in on the dinner, he scoffs at the original Pilsner beer they give him, invites them to engage in sex, then scoffs at them for spending all afternoon talking about it and refusing it when it's offered.

Though this is a consistently funny film, plenty of serious ideas surface. Claude can talk about cruising and AIDS, but can't share a startling symptom with the group. Dominique, who has paid for sex with men, recounts how they have stolen her passports, money, watch, the same as Claude's tricks have stolen from him. Diane is actually the most at risk in her relationship with Mario. Not much imagination is required to note the extent to which his options might reach. And she is getting addicted to pain in a game which she says has fixed rules, but no limits.

When Mario interrupts and insults the group, Diane has just made a feminist speech complaining she will never get tenure or make full pay since she took 10 years out to have children. She's embarrassed by Mario's frankness, but nearly breaks a leg joining him for more sensational sex.

And one is aware that these historians are recounting their own bedroom-eye view histories without realizing they fit into the grand plan of history being made by the moment.

At one point Diane comments to her class that we have many more documents on the Spanish than on the Aztecs, and many more on men than women. She suggests historical record favors winners, not losers. Less is shown of Claude's sex life than that of the heterosexual males. Less is shown of the women's previous liaisons than of the men's. Though Rémy discusses his conquests with gusto, and it seems that sex is important to him, it's only important for the moment. If women have the power to drive men mad with desire, it's so transitory as to be meaningless, and few women ever figure out how to benefit by this biological phenomenon.

Depending upon one's mood, of course, it's easy enough to go along with George Will's comment that these are wretched times. Possibly we are losing the empire, and under-educated, goalless, soulless lowlifes are taking over the shreds of what's left. But the women in this film have invested a great deal of time and thought looking for the heart of fulfillment, and have found not much there for them. The men have spent a great deal of time looking for temporary solutions to an age-old quest, and have a few shaggy dog stories to tell, and not much in the way of real memories of relationships. This might be due to the dichotomy of sex to thought. Sex is something not verbalized very well except by the few with profound literary talent. It lurks in a pre-civilized, bestial portion of mind and body, but doesn't set well at a civilized dinner party, and leaves the age-old question, just how far would we go, given an infinite number of partners, and an infinite number of positions? •

Cinema

think of their individual pleasures and self-fulfillment, that civilization has passed its prime and is on the decline. In its more dynamic formative state, individuals do not expect, probably don't even think about, personal happiness in marriage. Survival is the key, and the needs and wants of the individual are sublimated.

These two women, and two others, Louise and Danielle, get together for a lengthy workout session, and start talking about sex. Dominique and Diane, anyway, have spent a great deal of their leisure time searching for sexual fulfillment. Their revelations range from the ordinary — Louise would have (possibly) had a fling with her tennis coach if husband Rémy hadn't stalled his car in front of hers — to the more sensational — Diane is having an S-M affair with a shady character and has the wets to prove it. Dominique has paid for sex with men on her many travels, and once with two Africans they told her what to do, anyway. Louise and Rémy went to a swingers party for professional couples, and Louise had sex with another woman's husband, though there was not much to report.

Back at the ranch, four men are fixing dinner and talking about sex. They go on at great length about the thrill of the conquest and kinky things they have stumbled across. They laugh about how women discuss their private parts and the unwholesome afflictions they are prone to.

Of the eight principals, only Rémy and Louise are still married. Dominique never married; Pierre and Diane are both divorced; Claude is a homosexual, and a young male teaching assistant approaches the ensemble with not much to say. Danielle, the youngest of the women, met Pierre at a massage parlor where she performed a special on him while discussing the bizarre goings-on during the millennium. It was one of the funniest scenes in a film packed with funny scenes. Another is

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