Integrative understanding, which seeks to pull together various elements or aspects, often from different disciplinary perspectives, works best when one is selective in the concepts applied to any particular film. In the case of Jésus de Montréal, my focus will be on the specificity of the film’s authorship and how that authorship gets translated into a film. With respect to Jésus, the primary distinguishing characteristics of both the film and its authorship are nationality, religion, and language. They create the film’s sense of the urban with a specific ethno-religious spatiality, visuality, and orality. Montréal becomes the site of a Catholic Christian drama whose narrative arrived with the settler society in the sixteenth century and continues to this day.

Bill Marshall, a leading authority on Québec cinema, argues that two streams exist within Québec film. The first is “unified, masculine, heterosexual,”
while the second is “more heterogeneous, challenging that dominant masculi-
line position, qualifying it by seeking to articulate with it other key terms such
as class.”1 Jésus de Montréal is a film that incorporates both positions. It is filled
with heterosexual male perspectives, but it also challenges those perspec-
tives. This conflict is rooted in Marshall’s description of Québec society—and,
by extension, its cinema—as having a “minority, peripheral status” in relation-
ship to English Canada, the United States, and France.2 The codes of inferiority
generated by this multiple-colonized consciousness become, for Marshall, the
wellsprings of “innovation.” Marshall is referring to the emergence of a post-
colonial cultural consciousness, one in which Québec’s previous position of
inferiority (as a colony of France, of England, and of Canada) forms the basis of
demands for a new status and identity. Jésus is a highly innovative film whose
foundations lie in a distinct system of cultural meanings that link a new sense
of de-colonized nationality with Catholicism, the French language, and Québec
national identity.

Drawing on Fredric Jameson’s “Third World Literature in an Era of
Multinational Capitalism” (1986), Marshall points out how “any individual
utterance” can become a statement of the whole collectivity.3 Arcand’s film is
not simply a statement of personal creativity; it is a statement emanating from
a collectivity with a distinct cultural history. Drawing on these wellsprings,
Arcand has become a contemporary Québec filmmaker of world stature (his
2003 film, Les invasions barbares, won an Oscar for Best Foreign Film); he is
viewed as representing his culture as it articulates a new, noncolonized iden-
tity on the world stage, while still remaining rooted in the historical traumas of
second-class status and marginality. In Marshall’s view, the failure to achieve
full nation-state status encourages cinematic innovation as a way of expressing
this struggle for identity.

Arcand’s Jésus de Montréal (1989), which appeared in the wake of Le
déclin de l’empire américain (The Decline of the American Empire, 1986), winner
of the FIPRESCI Prize at Cannes, should be viewed as a highly innovative cin-
ematic statement in terms of articulating the new Québec. His setting, the
Christian Passion play in contemporary Montréal, was a major departure from
the historical dramas and epics associated with biblical cinema.4 This novel
approach in Christian-themed filmmaking resulted from the clash between
his traditional Catholic upbringing (from his birth in 1940 to 1959) and his
emergence as a filmmaker in the period of the Quiet Revolution (1960–75), during which Québec society became secularized, and the sovereigntist period of the Parti Québécois that followed. The film secularizes the Passion while retaining its Christian symbolism, a hybridity that represents the multiple worlds that Arcand had experienced.

It is important to note that for Arcand, Montréal is an adopted city. He was raised in the village of Deschambault on the St. Lawrence River, not far from Québec City. He also made the village his home when he was forging his career as a filmmaker from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s. Yet he spent his high school and college years (1950s) in Montréal and, later on, worked there, first for the National Film Board and later as an independent filmmaker. He came to Montréal as a student migrant from rural Québec, whose own psychological and cultural space was formed by the religious and secular ideologies of a conservative Québec Catholicism. These ideologies emphasized the preservation of the French language as equally important to the core of the older French Canadianism as religious patrimony, the sanctity of the traditional heterosexual family, and a veneration of the land. This conservative, rural foundation clashed with the sophisticated and self-conscious urbaneness of Montréal and the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, which sought to inaugurate a modern, secular world view befitting a nation-state-in-waiting. Arcand knew both worlds, which he amalgamated into a new, critical, and personal consciousness—an awareness of the problems inherent in both his religious past and its secular replacement. This is what made Jésus de Montréal a site of contested values. Arcand described the personal context of the film:

*Jesus of Montreal* was born from juxtaposing the themes of the Passion according to Saint Mark, my memories of life as an altar boy in a remote village that had been Catholic for centuries, and my daily experience as a filmmaker in a big cosmopolitan city. I will always be nostalgic about that time of my life, when religion provided a soothing answer to the most insolvable problems, while remaining quite aware of how much obscurantism and demagoguery these false solutions contained. . . . Through the thick fog of the past, I hear the echo of a profoundly disturbing voice. . . . All my films exude this loss of faith. It’s always with me. 
Le déclin de l’empire américain, which preceded Jésus de Montréal, received an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film after its recognition at Cannes. The film is an exploration of the seemingly vain and hedonistic pursuits of urbane academics. Although set in Montréal, it maintains a powerful rural presence when the academics head to the countryside for a weekend getaway. This escape from the city acknowledges the power of the land in formulating consciousness and culture. While the city in the film is coded as signifying competition, hypocrisy, and what one might call “false consciousness,” the countryside, which is meant to be read by audiences as the authentic Québec, offers some degree of conviviality and community. Here is an urban story that carries an overpowering rural myth.

A few years later, Arcand’s Jésus de Montréal relegated the rural to a marginal role, dropping the symbolic dualism of city and country visible in Le déclin de l’empire américain in favour of an urban-centric story in which the land or issues of national identity were completely eclipsed. Arcand, as the film’s auteur writer and director, questions whether the historical flow from “obscurantism and demagogy” to cosmopolitanism is progressive in terms of the human condition. As a migrant to Montréal, Arcand would have experienced how strange this multicultural (anglophone and allophone) city was to other francophone Québécois, who then saw it transformed into a home for a secular sense of national identity.

Arcand (in the quotation above) portrays Montréal as the city where he lost his original, natal faith. But the faith that he lost was a traditional one, associated with a repressed past that in adulthood he considers dysfunctional and empty. In Jésus de Montréal, he posits another faith—fresh, alive, and engaged, but still profoundly Christian. It is a “heretical” interpretation stripped of clerical encrustation and naked in its biblical purity. Arcand achieves this revitalized sense of Christian values and devotion by blending the past (the New Testament story of two thousand years ago) with the present (his contemporary Montréal), the religious (the Passion of Christ) with the secular (the theatre), rural park space (Mont Royal) with the deeply urban (soup kitchens and revolving restaurant towers). His own loss of faith liberated him to put his own stamp on his religious upbringing.

The great Québec filmmaker Michel Brault has described Arcand’s films as “a kind of history project on modern Quebec.” Of late, that history has been
volatile, revolutionary, and modernizing. What is crucial to Jésus is the filmmaker’s religious background. In Jésus de Montréal, he confronts both the Catholicism of the past and the secularism of his adulthood in equally condemning tones. He connects these two worlds through the story of the Passion, recreating the world of New Testament Jerusalem in post–Quiet Revolution Québec. By situating the Passion story in the present and stripping away the past, Arcand eliminates the narrative distancing of history and so brings the Passion story to a mythological level.10 History and the passage of time are replaced with the eternal present. Dressing the film in the personalities, voices, and situations of contemporary Montréal, while costuming the actors in biblical garb, Arcand sets up an equation between Montréal and Jerusalem, thereby producing a sophisticated interpretive milieu that cannot be found in period-piece re-creations of the Passion. By erasing the historical and cultural differences between the two cities, he revitalizes the universal and mythic attributes of the Passion. It is no longer a story of then and them, but of now and us.

Arcand’s view that the religiocentric world of his Duplessis-era childhood and its antithesis the secularized world of his Lévesque-era adulthood are equally problematic is rooted in a Catholic conviction that, despite transitory surface changes that might seem indicative of progress, history remains the expression of an unchanging, flawed, and fundamentally sinful human nature. When, in the film, a Catholic cleric turns to an actor to “update” the local church’s traditional Passion play so that it will be more appealing to contemporary viewers, his attempt to capture an audience becomes a statement of the inauthenticity of the Catholic Church’s response to political and social change. The revival of the play becomes more than the cleric had bargained for, just as the preaching of Christ became problematic for the religious establishment in Jerusalem. Only a filmmaker who knows Catholic orthodoxy but is removed from it spiritually could attempt such a bold project.

Arcand’s sensitivity to the inherent power of the biblical story infuses his film with an anti-establishment message that was part of the revolutionary nature of early Christianity. The sense of religious revolt and renewal that Christianity represented in its first centuries is translated to contemporary Montréal, where, ironically, it is the Catholic establishment rather than Judaic religious authority that represents the status quo. Situating Christ’s Passion in
the contemporary world in the guise of its re-enactment raises issues of performativity, secularity, and social change. When Canadian director Norman Jewison tried to deal with the same subject (the Passion) in his film adaptation of the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) sixteen years earlier, the result was not half as engaging as Arcand’s film. That wellspring of religiosity that defined Québec for so many centuries offered Arcand a rich pool of conscious and sub-conscious imagery that propels his film. It would seem that a devout Catholic upbringing like Arcand’s and his subsequent immersion in a dynamic, secular Montréal lifestyle were the two antithetical forces that generated both deep angst and profound insight, a combination that allowed Arcand’s own ethics to arise from a “lost” faith.

The inaugural spark for Arcand’s Montréal urbanity was his traditional Jesuit education. “I owe what I am to them,” he has remarked. The Jesuits, as he relates, introduced him to the power of Italian neo-realist film in its heyday. For this rural migrant, the relatively educated and cosmopolitan interests of his Jesuit teachers caused a breakthrough to a new world, while the artistry of postwar Italian cinema with its intense Catholic context provided the bridge. It was the city that opened Arcand’s eyes to cinema. (Québec had a law against children attending movie theatres.) It was his status in the world of the intelligentsia that made European cinema, rather than Hollywood, so attractive. When Arcand joined the National Film Board at the age of twenty-one, he became a documentarist, because neither Québec nor Canada had a feature film industry at that time. It was the birth of the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s that pointed in the direction of self-expression and opened the possibility for creating something new.

The National Film Board, or *Office national du film du Canada* (ONF), which was making Montréal its new organizational home with a distinct French-language production unit, was the second factor in Arcand’s urbanity. The 1960s was a decade of cinematic renewal with new developments in the documentary mode, especially the approach referred to as *cinéma direct*, which emphasized populist subjects and narrative spontaneity. The renewal was fuelled by a new cadre of daring, young filmmakers who knew each other and worked together. The nationalist impulse was exploding in Québec in the radical sixties. This impulse to rid the province of its old identity as cleric-ridden, insular, and backward-looking and foster a new identity as an independent
Québec, one that would be a master of its own destiny, appealed to the cultural and intellectual elite to which Arcand belonged.

A third factor was the rebirth of Québécois feature films, incubated by the ONF, of which Claude Jutra’s masterful *Mon oncle Antoine* (1970) is the most famous example. Cultural self-assertion—no longer limited to French-language television, literature, or the stage and music—came to include narrative cinema. Arcand’s association with the ONF taught him his craft, but it also generated the desire to go beyond the documentary mode. The 1960s were about removing the old restrictions, and Arcand was swept up in that energizing process of cultural liberation. One of the old restrictions was the limitation of the documentary mode. The narratives of the new society, which emphasized the francophone fact and its new sense of self-achievement, found a high level of fulfillment in narrative cinema.

The fourth and integrating element in Arcand’s distinct urbanity was the political revolution centred in Montréal—the movement for Québécois independence, which in the radical 1960s was decidedly leftist and national liberation-oriented. In his 1970 ONF documentary on the working class, *On est au coton*, Arcand acknowledged the importance of the factory worker, an emphasis that was part of the ideological milieu of the time. His hard-hitting portrayal of women workers in a cotton mill was so controversial that the ONF refused to release it. The original was finally shown in 1994 and only released in 2004, thirty-four years after it was made! While still living in his native village of Deschambault, he also wrote and directed *Réjeanne Padovani* (1973), a film about a Montréal mobster, which was followed a year later with *Gina* (1974), a docudrama about the censorship of *On est au coton*. Every one of these films is centred on Montréal. Arcand even did a short film on a hospital workers’ labour dispute in the Eastern Townships. But it was not until the electoral radicalism of the 1970s (the triumph of René Lévesque’s Parti Québécois as the province’s government) ended with the loss of the 1980 independence referendum that Arcand was able to express the contradictions in this new Québec. The palpable disappointment of the sovereignists over the public’s hesitancy toward independence was a catalyst for self-reflection and self-criticism. The promise that had motivated the intelligentsia had been overturned by corporate and populist reality. It was time to satirize that class and its ideology, which is what Arcand did in *Le déclin de l’empire américain*. 
Arcand’s friend and biographer, Réal La Rochelle, believes that both *Le déclin* and *Jésus* are “intimately linked to Montreal.” This was Arcand’s world as a filmmaker. He was intimate with it—close, understanding, and revelatory. Eventually, by returning to the Montréal characters from *Le déclin*, Arcand linked both of these earlier films, albeit in different ways, to his most successful and much later film, *Les invasions barbares* (2003), which won an Oscar for Best Foreign Film. La Rochelle points out in a chapter of his biography titled “Denys of Montreal” that “most of Arcand’s films take place in Montreal, which is certainly the case in his feature films.” That Arcand used a fictive Montréal as the site of his narratives suggests that he wanted to express his view of the city framed with his own cultural values.

Mont Royal, which overlooks the city, serves as a symbol of the rural in *Jésus*, while in both *Le déclin* and *Les invasions barbares* the same rural retreat serves to represent the “other,” more traditional Québec. This suggests that the signifiers associated with the urban and the rural are present in all three films. In the three films, the city is presented as a place of ideological fashionableness and spiritual emptiness, a place crying out for redemption in some fundamental way, while the countryside is presented as a place for introspection and conviviality, a place of human community, which the city lacks. This dichotomy reflects the dichotomy of the past and the present in Arcand’s own life. He works and struggles in the city, while in the countryside, he finds solace and space for contemplation. The city is the site of articulation; the countryside the site of reflection, the place of being rather than acting. In his adult life up to the mid-1980s, Arcand used a village retreat for creative endeavours, while the city was the locus of the turmoil and struggle associated with cinematic production.

Montréal, clearly central to Arcand’s cinema, is described metaphorically by La Rochelle as “the cocoon of his intellectual and artistic training . . . the flip side of Deschambault-de-Portneuf.” One may view Arcand’s urban experience as a kind of barbarian assault on his originating rural psyche. The urban world posited a new reality in opposition to his traditional upbringing, but it could not erase that upbringing. The past persisted, and when it came in contact with urban life, it turned it into a vital mythology or metaphor—the city of faith. The energizing and optimistic urban secularity that Arcand experienced in the 1960s and 1970s radically changed the identity he had brought
with him to the city, but it also left him dissatisfied, questioning the substitutes for religion that modernization offered. Arcand highlighted the conflict when he said that “secularity is doubtless the most obvious acquisition of the Quiet Revolution.” Beginning with Le déclin, continuing with Jésus, and then reiterated in Les invasions, Arcand presents secularity as a spiritual poison equivalent to the poison of traditional Catholicism, a hypocrisy that demands confrontation and exposure. The Quiet Revolution’s triumph of secularity over religion is presented in Jésus de Montréal as a fundamentally empty triumph. For Arcand, replacing the cassock with a business suit is not a sign of authentic progress. It is the role of the artist to make this kind of judgment, even though his work reflects both kinds of garb. Arcand, as the film’s maker, becomes an incarnation of the clerical character in his film because he has to first don a business suit to make the film/play/re-enactment happen. The temptations of that role are manifest in various scenes and characters in the film, just as Arcand’s other alter ego, the actor Daniel, assumes a saintly garb without compromise. The dialogue between the priest and the actor symbolizes Québec’s dialogue with its past, as well as the debate between the rural and urban sides of Arcand himself.

THE CITY OF MARY

The plot of Jésus centres on an actor named Daniel (Lothaire Bluteau), who is recruited by a cleric to rejuvenate an annual Passion play staged at his church for the edification of the parishioners. Like Christ and his New Testament disciples, Daniel collects a disparate group of actors engaged in various unappealing jobs and turns them into vehicles and examples of his message. The production that Daniel mounts proves popular with churchgoers, but its interpretation of the Gospels is heretical, and the play is eventually shut down by the priest. During the confrontation over terminating the play, Daniel is injured and eventually dies from those injuries. The film contains a number of scenes based on the New Testament narrative, including Christ’s driving the moneychangers out of the temple and Christ’s resurrection: the Montréal Métro serves as a symbolic tomb, from which Daniel “arises” much as Christ did. Bill Marshall, in his magisterial Quebec National Cinema, sees the film
as “a reworking of an old myth” rather than as an exploration of something new.17 “Reworking” is an understatement for what Arcand has done in Jésus. He has, in fact, provided a fundamental exegesis of the Passion, a powerful hermeneutic that matches and surpasses the best work on the subject by other filmmakers. While the life of Christ has been told cinematically many times, the success of Arcand’s retelling comes from its profound connection to French Canadian culture. Without his deep Catholic roots, the reverence for the Christ story with which Arcand imbues the film would be diminished. Arcand brings to the subject his residual piety. He is able to build an overpowering Christian imagery by using a contemporary venue and the conceit of a play within a play/movie. Although Marshall feels that the film contains no “new cultural hybridities,” I would argue that Arcand’s dehistoricization, contemporization, and relocation of the Passion play make it postmodern.18 His presentation of Montréal as a city of multiculturalism (the safe haven of the anglophone Jewish hospital) engages Montréal’s inherent diversity.

Marshall confirms this analysis when he states that the film casts Montréal itself “as a generalized Cité, a place of sin, corruption, modest heroics” and that its representation in the film is “crucial to an understanding of the relationship between modernity and postmodernity.”19 Montréal is the place in Québec where modernization and secularization were born and triumphed. Marshall points out that Montréal, prior to the Quiet Revolution, was an alien place for rural French Canadians because of its economic domination by anglophones and its principal ethnic enclaves (Jewish, Irish, and Greek). The presence of the Other was an excuse to view Montréal as different from the rest of Québec—supposedly the authentic Québec. What Arcand did in Jésus was bring that sense of a divided and hierarchical urbanscape and its aura of temptation and distraction into the broader Québec identity. In his film, Montréal is no longer some external dark force that must be resisted. It represents instead a dark force that resides within the body politic itself and includes every Québécor. The embrace of secularity, which threatens to undermine traditional francophone identity, is no longer the fault the anglophone and allophone Other. It is the product of francophones who want to look outward and compete in the broader world—who aspire to become maîtres chez nous, masters of their own house. Dreams of political equality and the desire to promote francophone capitalist enterprise lie at the heart of the new Montréal.
For those who have seen the claustrophobic rural universe presented in Claude Jutra’s *Mon oncle Antoine*, set in the era prior to the Quiet Revolution, it is easy to imagine Arcand’s boyhood. That world stands in sharp contrast to the commercially vibrant Montréal of *Jésus* some forty years later. In Jutra’s film, *les maudits anglais* (roughly translated as “the accursed English”) cast a shadow that suggests an outside cause of dysfunction, death, and hopelessness, while in *Jésus* the source of evil is within the francophone community itself. Arcand’s film expresses an innate pessimism about the human condition that harks back to the traditionalism of his childhood. He carries within himself the moralist’s critique of progress. He sees an unchanging human condition in which the results of being *maîtres chez nous* are empty. This is most evident in the opening scene of the film, in which the spiritually empty, celebrity-focused theatregoers symbolize the amoral climate created by secular consciousness, in which the disturbing moral issue of suicide presented in the play they have been attending is placed on par with decisions about where to go for an after-theatre meal.

The injection of a divinely inspired moral order into Montréal’s secular universe is what Arcand takes from the Gospel narrative. He brings a Christ-figure into the midst of Montréal society with results similar to those described by the Evangelists in regard to Jerusalem’s society. Both cities are central to their own societies and cultures. Jerusalem was the centre of Jewish society and of Roman power in Palestine. Montréal is an equally important centre for its society and has only very recently overturned the “Roman” power of the former ruling English elite. Pierre Nepveu and Gilles Marcotte, editors of *Montréal imaginaire*, believe that Montréal is the archetypal source of Québécois identity, which may be why it serves as such a powerful metaphor for Québec’s collective unconscious: “Montréal n’est pas tout; elle est peut-être l’image du tout,” they write. They call the city “la ville-mère, la ville-marie,” emphasizing the city’s sacredness by invoking the name of the original settlement (Ville-Marie, or the City of Mary), which honoured the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. Montréal may be symbolically associated with divinity as a city of faith, but it still is a mortal city requiring salvation. The loss of faith (we are all sinners) and the finding of faith (we are all redeemable) are the polarities that Arcand juxtaposes and unites in his highly sympathetic treatment of human beings as failed creatures. That he can see the biblical drama unfolding on Montréal’s streets and inside its buildings is a reflection of the power
of Catholicism in his own life. The emptiness of secular Montréal makes the city an appropriate site for redemption, just as Jerusalem was an appropriate site for the Passion because of its sacred character. The conflict between the forces of secularism and the forces of faith that Arcand injects into Montréal easily leads into a “greater debate about the cultures in which they [the films] are produced, screened and seen.” The overtness of Christianity in the film affirms its centrality to the culture of the province, even in an age dominated by secularism in its public life. Arcand uses the multiple Passion play narratives to undermine the film mode itself, which is associated with celebrity, commerce, and valorization of art. The impact of the film rested on its Québec audience, who could draw on their cultural and religious roots for an immediate appreciation of the metaphoric power of the film.

Arcand’s imagining of Montréal is both historically specific and mythologically universal. Bringing the Passion to Montréal turns the city into a universal entity, which projects itself on every city and every person. At the same time, Arcand represents the city as it was in 1989. Simon Harel, of the Université du Québec à Montréal, writes about the anglophone and allophone realities of Montréal in his essay “La parole orpheline de l’écrivain migrant.” What he has to say about immigrant writers who have made Montréal their home also applies to rural migrants such as Arcand. Sociologically, linguistically, ethnically, and geographically, Montréal is distinct from the rest of Québec society, including Québec City. Its heterogeneity has made it a kind of Other relative to more francophone parts of Québec. As a francophone, Arcand belongs to one part of Montréal. In the film, he presents the anglophone part of the city (the Jewish hospital) as a successful opposite to the crowding and chaos of the francophone hospital. The nonfrancophone segments of the city are presented as more under control, more competent, and more professional than the confused francophone parts. It is the conflict within and the failures of the francophone community that is his focus. While the francophone world of Montréal is inward looking and chaotic, the Other reaches out to the world, as signified by Daniel’s postmortem organs that are flown to all parts of the globe to help others. It is through these global connections that the francophone body is universalized. Although there may not be “cultural hybridities” in Arcand’s film, there is global awareness. This awareness is associated with the universality of Christianity, irrespective of ethnicity or nationality.
One may consider Arcand an outsider who must somehow make Montréal his own through his films. The stance of the outsider represents a consciousness that is often critical, aware of the failings and problems glossed over by those for whom the city is second nature. A postcolonial writer in Montréal might write of the racism and hardships facing his or her group from the francophone majority. Arcand can’t do this because he belongs to the dominant group, but he can find something problematic with his own group, just as Mordecai Richler did with the Jewish community in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. It is fair to say that Arcand’s initial feeling of not being at home in Montréal and his later comfort with Montréal as his home suggests a process of liberation from the past that allows him to embrace the present as the past’s equal. He does not pine for the past: he critiques it. He does not laud the present: he critiques it. It is always, Harel argues, the self of the future—the potential, possible, or idealized self—that is at play. That is why the film ends with a hopeful message, a hopefulness that bespeaks not only the original biblical message of redemption but also Arcand’s autobiographical new beginning in Montréal. In *Jésus* and *Le déclin*, he created his own new testament to the future of the city.

Montréal, as the place of familiarity and difference, is ethnically divided, but these divisions are not presented as spiritually fundamental, whatever their sociological import. What is fundamental is the overarching moral crisis of a secularism that requires salvation, and it is this crisis that simultaneously imparts a singularity and universality to Montréal. In commenting about *Les invasions barbares* (2003), also set in Montréal, Arcand said, “After Duplessis and the Church, Quebec woke up to a world without structure.” In *Jésus*, Arcand reinstated a “structure” to the new Québec, which offers a purified or idealized version of its religious past. Arcand took his sense of the sacred and transferred it to a complex urban environment whose diversity he saw from one side only. On the one hand, the sacredness of the film is diegetic—an envelope that surrounds the audience with spiritual references. On the other hand, the secularity of the film is dialogical, because it involves the inherent specificity of time, place, and people or actors. But the dialogical aspect, because Arcand makes it symbolic, is also clothed in the diegetic myth of the Passion. In this way, the city’s Métro is both the tomb of Christ and Daniel (sacred) and a subway (secular). The actor Daniel is both an actor (secular) and a saintly embodiment.
of Christ (sacred). Mont Royal is both a park (secular) and Golgotha (sacred). Montréal is both Jerusalem, the city of the temple, and Sodom and Gomorrah, the city of sin. Because of the intensity of these associations, Arcand’s Montréal cannot be the Montréal of others—of writers like Hugh MacLennan or Mordecai Richler, for instance, whose religious roots were not Catholic. But what Arcand, who speaks out of the majority, shares with these minority writers is what Harel sees as melancholy and what the English Canadian film scholar, Jim Leach, calls “ingrained pessimism.”26 The tragic is appealing to a writer, who feels estranged. *Jésus de Montréal* is not about happiness; it is about the necessity of suffering and sacrifice for spiritual awakening and human transformation. With its message of hope and resurrection (in a reconfiguration of the Eucharist, Daniel’s bodily organs are transplanted into those who require them to be renewed), the film parallels both the narrative trajectory and the theological dimension of the biblical story very closely. Personal sacrifice is the main idea. The interaction of the divine and the human (the basic binary that underlies Arcand’s other binaries) results in a world of “double vision” with two opposing but united aspects constantly at play.27 The audience can view any event in the film from either the secular or the sacred side. In fact, one could say that the whole thrust of the film is a display of how the secular is redeemable through divine intervention. Daniel, the actor, is transformed from his secular occupation as an actor to a divine saviour.

*Jésus de Montréal* is a statement of Arcand’s transition from his rural childhood, signified by the park at Mont Royal as the site of the enacted Passion play, to his urban adulthood, signified by the business dealings in the revolving restaurant high above the city. The theme of transition between the old and the new, the rural and the urban is also present in both *Le déclin* and *Les invasions*. The two films use the same country retreat where the same characters from both films gather to reflect and celebrate conviviality and community. At the country retreat, the unilingual universe of Québec’s secularized intellectual elite, which is Arcand’s immediate community, has replaced Catholicism with secular ideologies of the day. In *Jésus*, the hilltop park plays the same role as the country house—it is a space of spiritual understanding far from the economic and political interests of the day. For Arcand, Mont Royal is a sacred place. Spiritual values flow from the rural to the urban, where they clash with their secular nemesis.
DEATH AND REDEMPTION IN THE CITY OF FAITH

A closer examination of one or two key scenes and characterizations illuminates the sense of what a city of faith means for Arcand, of how Christian narrative and symbolism drive the film, and of how death is the overarching partner of redemption. The film begins with a depiction of a theatrical production in which the protagonist commits suicide because he sees the future as a void and rejects the Christian message of hope and salvation. The film ends with a character, also an actor in a play (and a film), who offers hope by dying for the sake of others. The two deaths that anchor the filmic narrative are contrasted in a theological way—the former condemned for its hopelessness and the latter held up as a model for redemption. In both cases, the paradigm of a play creates a church-like sanctuary for a ritual performance. Arcand creates a moral dichotomy by having the audience for the first play praise the actor for his portrayal of a suicide while not being touched by its moral implications. In contrast, the audience for the second, Christ-like death is nonexistent except for a few loyal fellow actors, who have been converted to Daniel's Christian view of the world. Being in the Passion play has redeemed them by turning them into biblical characters. Arcand has the public-as-audience speak platitudes about the first play when they leave the production, while it stands silent and distant at the end of the second. The audience for Daniel's Passion performance is touched by the performance before the play is shut down, but it does not then act in a transformative way. It absorbs but does not return. Only Daniel’s fellow actors, following the New Testament narrative and having “lived” through the Passion, are able to embrace the message. By using the mechanism of a play within a film, Arcand is able to equate the filmic audience for the play with the audience that is viewing the film. In both cases, they watch, they are moved emotionally, but they then leave and carry on their daily lives untouched by the message of either the Passion or the film.

The Catholicism that underpins the whole film is one that contains both traditional and countertraditional elements, a juxtaposition that can be said to reflect Arcand’s own relationship to the faith. One particular scene expresses this curious blend of past and present that inhabits the film. When Daniel meets the priest, who wants to reinvigorate his church’s annual Passion play and so increase the audience, the two encounter each other in
a cathedral-like church, a vast space empty except for the two of them. They are like two isolated gladiators facing off, or two private businessmen negotiating a deal, or two believers (the penitent and the priest) in the solitude of the confessional. The lack of other witnesses to the event heightens the sense of moral imperative and individual decision making that is at the core of the film. The scene is also a reflection of the old piety of Québec, expressed in its grand churches, but the emptiness of the church also suggests a lack of congregation, an emptying of the religious vessel. The Church is now a shell of its former self. Turning to an actor to revitalize the church’s play suggests that the Church is not interested in real piety, only the emotional equivalent that an actor can put on. In this one scene, the traditional spatiality of the Church in traditional Québec society is vacated and hollowed out. Visually, the Church is still there in its architectural grandeur, but that grandeur is superficial. It can be seen but not felt, which adds to the pathos of the situation. Finally, the orality associated with this visualized space is nonrhetorical. The orality is not a booming sermon spoken to a large audience of attentive believers. It is a one-on-one quiet conversation, almost secretive in tone as it attempts to overcome a problem in a private way. Arcand is satirizing the idea that a play can save the Church because the problem of loss of faith is so deep. He equates the moral superficiality of the audience in the film’s opening scene at the theatre with the moral superficiality of the priest’s search for an audience for the church’s Passion play production. The issue for the priest is one of quantity, nothing more.

The dramatic decline of traditional Catholicism in Québec is a sociological fact whose cultural significance Arcand comprehends. He juxtaposes the “empty sepulchre,” referred to in the Bible as salvific because Christ rose from it, with the “empty sepulchre” of the church and its priest, who is himself without faith, acting in a role in which he no longer believes. He is presented as a technician rather than a spiritual leader. In the biblical narrative, the emptying of the tomb brings hope and new life. In Arcand’s metaphor, the emptiness of the basilica represents death and a dying power. The priest has no real hope for genuine renewal. He only wants to look successful, and he believes that “updating” the Passion play is all that it will take. Arcand posits the view that salvation cannot come from the empty vessel of traditional Catholicism; it must come from the outside, from those who are morally pure.
The French critic Guy Hennebelle quotes Jean Chabot, the auteur director of the film *Mon enfance à Montréal*, as saying that the 1970s saw the death of the concept of a French Canadian cinema and the birth of a Québec cinema.\textsuperscript{28} Arcand’s cinema is clearly of the Québécois variety, but it is conscious of and referential to the French Canadian past. The French Canadian roots cannot be hidden or erased from the new identity. It persists and Arcand creates a powerful continuity between the two identities—the traditional one and the modernized one. Having experienced two distinct worlds and the historical link between them within his own life, Arcand was able to marry effectively the story of first-century Jerusalem and twentieth-century Montréal. Because of Québec’s religious history, it is possible to turn contemporary Québec society into a reflection of Judaic society in the Roman era. Without that religious past, the film is inconceivable. For some, like Bill Marshall, this may be a drawback and an ethnic limitation, but one can also argue that this singularity creates dramatic potential filled with universal significance. The universality of *Jésus* allows any audience to embrace Montréal as a stage on which it can see itself. The staging of the Passion play and the transformation of its actors into personifications of biblical figures in their “real lives” is the conceit that turns the film into a dramatic tour de force. For a non-Catholic, non-Québec audience, the familiarity of the Christian story is what maintains interest. Once the Christ-figure—the lean, soft-spoken, yet intense Daniel—appears, the audience is drawn into the obvious religious dimensions of the story.

Arcand’s personal and historical journey from a pious, conservative French Canadian boy from the countryside to a Québécois filmmaker in the metropolitan centre is one of personal transformation. This is the message of the film and the message of the Passion play itself. Even though Arcand is trapped by history and his own place in that history, the morality he portrays in the film resonates with diverse audiences. If he had not been a migrant from the past, he could not have viewed the present with such critical force. If he had not been imbued with his earlier spiritual values, he could not have been interested in the contemporary state of Québec and its religious dimension. By moving Christ’s Passion to contemporary Montréal, Arcand has resacralized his city. When one Russian critic termed Arcand “the last humanist” of current cinema, he could easily have been referring to Arcand’s ability to lift the mundane and the secular to a higher spiritual plane.\textsuperscript{29}
When a city is made into a city of a certain faith—in this case, Catholic Christianity—then there is a concern that this expresses homogeneity or a monolithic reality, which goes against the grain of postmodernism’s current privileging of diversity. Bill Marshall rightly states that “we must look elsewhere for a fuller engagement with the so-called postmodern realities of the city.” Arcand’s Montréal is heavily francophone. But, it may be argued, so was Jerusalem a heavily Jewish city in the Roman occupation period, and the biblical story is told within that community’s life and within that historical moment. Montréal was originally a French creation like Jerusalem was a Jewish creation, but like all cities, Montréal underwent historical transformation through war and occupation. When Montréal was captured by the English, as Jerusalem was captured by the Romans, the stories of each city expanded. There is no need to conclude that the telling of one aspect of the city’s reality is necessarily a diminishment of other aspects. That single aspect is a doorway into a certain reality, which for Arcand, the humanist, is applicable to everyone. He sought to raise Montréal from a sociological statement to a moral one that encompasses everyone, even if that morality comes from the history of one community.

ARCAND AND URBANISM

Because of Arcand’s francocentrism, the urban space of his Montréal is only one of many ways in which the city is inhabited. The power of Arcand’s presentation of the city comes from his outsider stance, a theme that may also be found in the Passion play itself, in which Christ is presented as an outsider to both the religious and the secular power entrenched in Jerusalem at the time. Arcand’s youthful piety met its first major secular test in Montréal’s urban space. The result was the birth of a different morality that judged the old spirituality as inadequate, even barren. The religious baggage that he carried with him to the city was jettisoned in one way (its institutional orthodoxy) but reborn in another (its fundamental message). In Jésus, Arcand created a vision of Québec that expressed the evolution of his own people in a way that could be both understood by them and appreciated by those who had not undergone that evolution.
Overlaying representational space on spatial practice, Arcand’s film raises familiar sites like the basilica or Mont Royal to a level of religious equivalency. By turning a modern city into a sacred space where the divine intervenes and presents itself to the population, Arcand has converted the secular space of his city into an age-old identity associated with religious beliefs. This identity transforms the inhabitants of the city into actors or players in a divine drama (the Passion play), and in turn, the film helps its viewing audience to identify with either the actors performing the play or its audience. This returning of the city to sacral roots, whether conceived as a centre of worship (Catholicism’s Rome) or a covenant between a people and God (Judaism’s Jerusalem), is an achievement rooted in Québec’s language, its religious legacy, and the transitional generation to which Arcand belongs. The ways in which the filmmaker has embraced and represented the sacral and secular spaces of the city are associated with his earlier loss of faith (the emptiness of the church) and his transformation of secular elements (the Métro) into religious symbols. The viewers of the film experience its treatment of urban space as transformative.

The visual power of the film emerges from Arcand’s fundamental sense of the transformation that he brought to the city’s spaces. The camera sets up scenes reminiscent of biblical narratives, allowing the audience to equate a secular place (audition theatre) with a sacred space (the temple). He then reverses this when he takes a sacred place (the basilica) and makes it a scene of business (negotiating a contract for the Passion play). The camera plays up the characteristics of the scene that highlight the contradictions in the public significance accorded certain places. Because the Passion—most often experienced by Catholics as the Stations of the Cross, which are mounted on Catholic church walls—is seen in a certain way, the Montréal-Jerusalem transitions that Arcand wants us to notice are linked to these earlier visual representations. The scenes presented through the lens of the cinematographer have been chosen to illustrate certain moments in the Passion narrative that viewers who are acquainted with it will recognize. The film is generally dark rather than light because of the suffering that infuses the event. A sense of doom pervades the imagery. Most importantly, the visual elements are primarily interior shots, representative of the inwardness of the film and its focus on conscience. There is little in the way of streetscapes in the film. The most exterior scene is the re-enactment of the Passion in the park, but since the play is performed in
the dark, even this outdoor scene is genuinely claustrophobic, with very little distance or perspective or landscape. In fact, most of the scenes of the Passion play consist of close-ups of either the actors or the audience members as they react, as befits the focus on the Christ-like character’s suffering and message. Interestingly, the most expressive sense of space or distance in Montréal is in the empty basilica or the near-empty subway station where Daniel dies. Both, of course, are enclosed sepulchres where the negativity of death excludes the living. That a subway platform can be presented as a potentially religious space and a Christian basilica as a potentially secular (business) space makes the location of the sacred in nature (the park) especially poignant and symbolic. Arcand wants to emulate the life of the earliest Christians, who had to create a new space for worship outside the orthodoxies of either Greco-Roman paganism or Judaism.

The orality of the film uses the ethereal and parable-like economy of language used by the Jesus character to contrast with the naïve excitement and lack of foresight by the rest of the cast. Daniel’s enigmatic speech, parts of which are taken directly from the New Testament accounts, highlights his divine nature and contrasts it with the ordinariness of his fellow actors. The use of English at the end of the film suggests the global mission of Christianity as it expanded beyond its Jewish origins. Music in the film is integral to its orality. The film’s beginning and ending credits are accompanied by the triumphant singing of a church choir. In this way, the film is presented as a religious experience equivalent to a church service, where the soul is meant to be healed and feelings of spiritual euphoria are articulated.

The gaze of the film (the director’s perspective) is that of the heterosexual male who authored the text and directed its performance. But the film is also informed by the gaze of the story’s original male authors, the Evangelists, on whose narratives Arcand draws. Having the ethereal Daniel as the film’s focal lead represents yet another male gaze, although Daniel is demasculinized into an androgynous figure, someone who is beyond gender. The film’s francophone universe is almost total but is presented as a small part of a global reality, which fits with Arcand’s view of Québec nationalism as a conflicted and contradictory reality. Kevin Pask describes the Québec nationalism of this period as “late nationalism” in which citizenship is no longer an intrinsic identity.32 It is a postclassical nationalism, meaning that it can have a national identity without
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a nation-state expressing that identity. Québec held two referenda (1980 and 1995) under sovereignty-association governments, both of which failed to win a majority for an independent nation-state in Québec. Arcand’s simultaneous critique of secular nationalism and its commercial imperatives and of the Church reflects a conflicted loyalty between the past (the world associated with the term French Canadian and its rigid Church controls) and the present (the world associated with a secular Québec state). In the battle to define what belongs to Caesar/Canada and what belongs to God/Québec, Arcand sits happily, like many Québécois, on the fence.

Arcand made this film in his late forties, so it represents a certain generational maturity that brings gravitas to the topic. His generation experienced the two worlds, conservative and radical, religious and secular, whose differing discourses he learned so well. If he had been raised within the singular world of post–Quiet Revolution Québec with its diminished religious power, it would have been unlikely that he would have conceived this film in the novel way he did. The film receives its power from his earlier Catholicism, while its form is garnered from the secular arts. This hybridity infuses the film with a metaphoric power that is a departure from the typical period piece about the life of Christ. Likewise, its tangential Gnosticism is sufficiently heretical to be a further departure from orthodox cinematic treatments of the Jesus story.

Arcand’s Québec nationality, his French language, and his Catholic religious roots create a dialogue or interaction between the filmmaker, the film, and its initial Québec audience. These three elements create a structure of meaning that links the creator, the creation, and its reception. The codes and symbols found in the imagery, the language, and the religious narrative of the film are shared ones. That is why a francophone Montréal audience has a different relationship to the film than an American or English Canadian audience might have. Arcand has projected his own trajectory as a Québécois, a Catholic, and a francophone into the film, a trajectory known to or experienced by his primary Québec audience. For example, the film does not dwell on political debates concerning Québec nationalism; rather, it gives us Arcand’s critique of the relative importance of these debates in comparison to deep, moral issues, while also capturing his Québec audience’s sense of ambivalence about the nationalist project. Likewise, the film’s French language is imbued with Arcand’s own class character and that of the audience for the film, which he
references inside the film as the audience for the two plays. This holds true for the Catholicism of Québec, which has its own cultural history. A contemporary Québec generation’s relationship to the film is itself a historical one, because the film is now a quarter-century old. Québec’s sense of nationalism has evolved, and the secularity that Arcand challenges in the film is now more firmly entrenched, as evidenced in his 2003 film *Les invasions barbares*, in which his own generation now faces the issue of death and the children of that generation live in a globalized, commercialized, nonreligious environment.

The most prominent disciplinary characteristic of the film is history. Scholar Jim Leach views Arcand’s work as infused with historical sensibility. But this historical sensibility is in turn subsumed by the film’s moralism, a combination of theology and philosophy. By this, I mean that Arcand, who was no longer a believer when he made the film, gives the Christ story a moral patina rather than positioning the Passion as an article of faith. The universal themes of sacrifice, moral values, and conscience are widely applicable beyond a specific religious faith. Arcand also makes a reference to the fine arts, especially in regard to Shakespeare’s comment on life as a stage and all of us as actors upon it. Arcand’s reflections on role-playing and theatrical performance at every level of human existence permeates the film and serves as a commentary on both filmmaking as art and its ability to reveal truths about the human condition. In his portrayal of Montréal, Arcand raises the city to new heights of meaning, far beyond its role as the focal point of Québec nationalist culture. He gives the city biblical dimensions, and in so doing, he undermines its secular nationalist character, as the centre of a new political identity, by positing the superiority of a moral humanism rooted in the selfsame past that the Quiet Revolution overthrew. *Jésus de Montréal* is a statement of the fundamental role of religion in Québec’s identity, even at a time when religion is sociologically and ideologically absent.

As a filmmaker, Arcand sought to build a bridge the urban reality of Montréal, symbol of the new Québec, and his rural origins, which rooted him in the Québec of the past. In contrast, a new generation of Montréal-born filmmakers experienced the city from a perspective that differed quite radically from Arcand’s. Not only were they born and raised in the heart of the new, urban Québec, but their francophone world was defined more strongly by Montréal’s diversity and by the competing groups who claimed the city as their
home. While Arcand has never produced a film about his own coming of age in rural Québec, Jean-Claude Lauzon created a masterpiece of his growing up in Montréal’s Mile End working-class district. *Léolo* came out only a few years after *Jésus de Montréal*, yet its treatment of the city is fundamentally opposed to Arcand’s. Where Arcand finds redemption, Lauzon finds madness, yet, as the next chapter will show, the religious imagery of Lauzon’s film is almost as powerful as that of Arcand. The film’s pagan spirit is resplendent with Christian motifs. Also, both films involve a going back or a return to some kind of pristine place. Arcand's film follows a collective religious narrative rooted in his childhood that audiences grasp easily, while in Lauzon’s film, the return to childhood is individual and idiosyncratic. If Arcand’s Montréal is contemporary with his film, Lauzon’s Montréal is set in the late 1950s, when the old Québec still reigned. These two different Montréal urbanities, one before and the other after the Quiet Revolution, are linked through their national, religious, and linguistic commonality. But this commonality is more symbolic and metaphoric than literal because Lauzon’s Montréal is conceived by an insider raised in a problematic and tense environment where the francophone fact was in constant conflict with the allophone and anglophone. Arcand’s city of faith is transformed by Lauzon into a city of failed dreams. The nominal identities that he shares with Arcand (male heterosexuality, francophone nationality, Catholicism) are overshadowed by Lauzon’s working-class origins and the traumas of repression and rebellion. With Lauzon, we step beyond Arcand’s middle-class world of theatre, restaurants, and lawyers, and we enter the bowels of a gritty and troubling urban space where the redemptive power of the Cross is replaced with the redemptive power of Jungian water and art.