Barbarian Invasions

By ACSH Staff — February 26, 2004

*Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* isn't the only film I'll be rooting for to win an Oscar or two. Nominated for Best Foreign Film and Best Screenplay is the smart, funny, poignant French-Canadian film *Barbarian Invasions* by Denys Arcand. The film's positive reception with U.S. critics teaches one very important lesson: If a film harshly criticizes socialized medicine and other follies of the left but has subtitles and is a little artsy, even capitalism-hating U.S. film critics may like it. That's useful information.

*Barbarian Invasions*, a sort of reunion-film sequel to 1986's *Decline of the American Empire* that nonetheless stands on its own, features a man on his apparent deathbed in a Canadian hospital. From the opening shots we are invited to worry about the long lines, shabby conditions, and mediocre service of this all too typical north-of-the-border health facility. When the patient's businessman son tries to get his father moved to a better room one left completely unused on another floor due to a bureaucratic snafu he receives a hilarious torrent of jargon-laden excuses from a hospital administrator about why the rules make such an upgrade impossible.

Ultimately, the son is compelled to make under-the-table deals with the thuggish heads of the hospital workers union in order to improve his father's accommodations and is compelled to take his father across the border to the U.S. repeatedly in order to get MRI scans, rather than face weeks or months of waiting to get them in Canada.

The father's old friends, mostly disillusioned middle-aged leftists (at least one happily abusing his overseas sinecure on the government payroll), visit his hospital room and reminisce about all the failed "isms" they've believed in over the years: socialism, Situationism, feminism, deconstructionism (that fourth one, for those lucky enough to have missed that episode, was a melange of Marxist, Freudian, and feminist theory, served with a huge dose of relativism and used in the 1980s to analyze books and movies). The father even confesses to being a former adherent of "cretinism" his term for a naive faith in Mao's brutal Cultural Revolution, which he finally realized was absurd when he praised the Revolution to a visiting Chinese woman, only to discover her family were among Mao's millions of victims (beloved by hippies or not, Mao was perhaps the most prolific mass-murderer of all time). Today, the characters praise the genius of the U.S.'s Founders, and a brief but jarring clip of the World Trade Center attack reminds us to beware the barbarians at the gate of the empire.

Obstacles to a sane life aren't all created by the left in the world of *Barbarian Invasions*, though. The drug war hinders the son's efforts to acquire heroin with which to relieve his father's pain, and we are reminded of the economic futility of the War on Drugs in a monologue by a weary police detective. When pain relief is no longer an option, the characters sympathetically contemplate euthanasia. And through it all, there are asides about the uselessness of religion for comforting our
brainy, skeptical protagonists. It's not just Western supernatural thinking that takes a hit, though: the characters mock a woman who pops into the hospital room to espouse Eastern mysticism, alternative medicine, and the view that "your body is in your head."

This may all just be evidence that, like a lot of non-U.S. cinema, Barbarian Invasions is cynical about all conventional wisdom and modern institutions so theorizes my Italian economist friend Maria Paganelli but I think something more positive is going on here [UPDATE: After seeing the film, Prof. Paganelli agrees, based primarily on the positive depiction of the capitalist son]. Not everything in Barbarian Invasions works badly. Friendship, family, financial incentives, U.S. technology, and non-ideological common sense all come out looking fairly good. Perhaps best of all, while the movie may leave some U.S. citizens wanting to head north of the border for thoughtful cinema, it won't leave them wanting to flee the U.S. healthcare system for the Canadian one, which is more than can be said for a lot of political rhetoric in recent years.