

Disillusionment Trilogy: a Study of the Effects of Work-Related and Psychosocial Stress Through Film

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Summary

Currently, disorders derived from work-related and psychosocial stress are increasingly important. Here the influence of professional activities on personal and family life and on the psyche is analysed by means of three films filmed in different periods: the North American *The Arrangement* (1969), the Spanish *The Green Pastures* (1979) and the Canadian *The Age of Ignorance* (2007).

Keywords: Work-related stress, Psychosocial adaptation disorder, Adaptation.

Introduction

Stressful events in life are conceptualised as important life facts and are perceived as a threat and require a greater effort for people to become adapted to them. They are unexpected, undesired, and uncontrollable. Many studies have shown a significant correlation between the intensity of the symptomatology and the number of events experienced. The overall prevalence of psychosocial stress has been set at 36.5% and it has been pointed out that the presence of psychiatric pathology in people who suffer from stress is 26.2% above that of the population who do not. Likewise, being under serious threat for long periods of time has been related to depressive disorders, and events of loss to depressive or anxiety disorders¹. An epidemiological study carried out in Zaragoza has shown that the percentage of anxiety, depressive or mixed disorders -among which adaptation disorders are included- is above 75% of the psychiatric pathology of patients. They amounted to 20% of the psychiatric consultations of the mental health team and between 9.5 and 13.5% of the psychiatric disorders dealt with in Primary Health Care. In a study carried out in Oslo, psychosocial problems were present in 33% of the consultations made because of physical symptoms, and they accounted for between 3 and

13% of the reasons for consultation, labour disputes being the most recognisable².

“It has been proved that psychological harassment can have serious consequences on workers’ health, and that it can affect them in a great variety of ways; at an individual level, victims present a wide range of stress symptoms and severe psychosomatic symptoms such as physical illnesses and low job satisfaction. In the organisational field, it has been demonstrated that job harassment (“Mobbing”) is related to high levels of absenteeism, numerous attempts to leave the organisation, and job rotation. The wide range of consequences stemming from psychological harassment have turned this phenomenon into a topic of great public interest and it is considered one of the most severe forms of psychosocial stress in the workplace”³.

Data from the International Labour Organization, ILO, show that between 10 and 15% of workers suffer job harassment⁴. In Spain, 15% of the male population and 22% of the women claim that within the last three months they have had an excessive amount of work that has made them feel overwhelmed (5). Women are more exposed to psychological harassment than men. Organisational factors have

a greater influence in the manifestation of harassment in men, while personal rivalry appears in almost half of the women³.

Work and job harassment have not been far from film (table 1). Whereas in films such as *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992), by James Foley, or the recent *Welcome to Farewell-Gutmann/ Bienvenido a Farewell-Gutmann* (2008) by Xavi Puebla, the unscrupulous capitalist-mercantilist system of large companies and corporations is scrutinised, in this article three films of a more intimist type are analysed, in which the influence of the working world on personal and family life and on the human psyche, the contradiction between Western lifestyle and a noticeable disillusionment towards this way of living, and the reaction of the Western capitalist as regards imposed lifestyles can be seen.

Three films have been selected, which chronologically offer a vision of the imposition of the labour model and of capitalist life, first in its birthplace, the United States, [*The Arrangement* (1969), by Elia Kazan]; then in Spain, [*The Green Pastures/ Las verdes praderas* (1979), by José Luis García], and finally in Canada, [*The Age of Ignorance/ L'âge des ténèbres* (2007), by Denys Arcand]. Several similarities in their plots stand out. Thus, the main character is always a middle-aged man, belonging to the moneyed class. He has a socially acceptable family, and a monotonous job that

supplies him with money but that neither stimulates nor pleases him, which affects his life negatively. This will lead him to try to remedy his existential crisis, as we see in the subtle development of all three films. These main characters choose different solutions. In two of them, fire is involved in the outcome, as a symbol of the destruction and sacrifice of a lifestyle that does not satisfy them, and in the other divorce and unemployment is chosen as a solution to the protagonist's irrelevant life.

1.- *The Arrangement*

Technical details

Title: *The Arrangement*

Country: United States

Year: 1969

Director: Elia Kazan

Music: David Amram

Photography: Robert Surtees

Film editor: Stefan Arnsten

Screenplay: Elia Kazan based on his homonymous novel

Cast: Kirk Douglas, Faye Dunaway, Deborah Kerr, Richard Boone, Hume Cronyn, Michael Higgins, Carol Eve Rossen, William Hansen, Harold Gould, Michael Murphy, John Randolph Jones, Anne Hegira, Charles Drake, E.J. André and Philip Bourneuf.

Table 1. Some films on cinema and work

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strike/ Stachka (1925) by Sergei M. Eisenstein. USSR. Drama. 2. Novecento (1976) by Bernardo Bertolucci. Italy. Historical drama. 3. Pelle the Conqueror/ Pelle erobreren (1987) by Bille August. Denmark, genre: drama. 4. Glengarry Glen Ross (1992) by James Foley. United States. Drama. 5. The Van (1996) by Stephen Frears. United Kingdom. Comedy. 6. Hitting Bottom/ En la puta calle (1997) by Enrique Gabriel. Spain. Drama. 7. Human Resources/ Ressources Humaine (1999) by Laurent Cantet. France. Drama. 8. The Navigators (2001) by Ken Loach. United Kingdom. Drama. 9. El efecto Iguazu (2002) by Pere Joan Ventura. Spain. Drama. 10. Alzados del suelo (2004) by Andrés Linares, Spain. Documentary. 11. La mano invisible (2004) by Isadora Guardia. Spain. Documentary. 12. The Take (2004) by Avi Lewis. Canada-Argentina. Documentary. 13. Agua con sal (2005) by Pedro Pérez-Rosado. Spain. Drama. 14. Veinte años no es nada (2005) by Joaquín Jordá. Spain. Drama. 15. North Country (2005) by Niki Caro. United States. Drama. 16. Working Class (La historia del último parado) (2005) by Xavier Berraondo. Spain. Drama. 17. Bubble (2006) by Steven Soderbergh. United States. Drama. 18. Switch off/ Apaga y vámonos (2005) by Manel Manyol. Spain. Documentary. 19. Workingman's Death (2005) by Michael Glawogger. Austria and Germany. Documentary. 20. Welcome to Farewell-Gutmann/ Bienvenido a Farrewl-Gutmann (2008) by Savi Puebla. Spain. Drama. |
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Colour: Color

Runtime: 125 minutes

Genre: Drama

Production companies: Athena Productions

Synopsis: A new day begins for the Anderson family: Eddie leaves for work, leaving his wife and his daughter at home, but on the motorway he suddenly tries to kill himself. After a stay in hospital, back home he withdraws into a silence which he only breaks to attempt to build up for his wife what his last year of life has amounted to: a year in which his success as an executive in an advertising company and his relationship with one of the agency's secretaries, Gwen, has done nothing but emphasise the false-ness of his life. From then on, Eddie tries to recover control over his life, unsuccessfully returning to the agency, recovering his relationship with Gwen and taking care of his dying father against the opposition of his own family. Amidst this personal crisis, he goes over everything his life has been until then and must face his wife's attempt to shut him away in a psychiatric hospital, from where Gwen will eventually rescue him.

<http://imdb.com/title/tt0064041>

The Arrangement tells the story of Eddie Anderson (Kirk Douglas), a middle-aged advertising executive from Los Angeles of Greek origin (his real name is Evangelos Arness). He enjoys all the wealth and comforts that would make anyone happy: a successful job and a considerable income. He has finished an advertising campaign for a tobacco company, he has an impressive house in a residential area on the outskirts of Los Angeles, perfectly fitted out and with servants, several cars -among them a convertible sports car-, a pretty and attractive wife, Florence (Deborah Kerr), and an exemplary daughter who has finished high school and is about to begin at university (Figure 1). He even has an affair with a secretary... Everything seems perfect, but in his mind set he feels there is something that does not fit in: a deep underlying disillusionment brought about by the fast pace of his life, and a weariness with the way he lives. One seemingly ordinary morning after having breakfast in the garden of his mansion, while on his way to the office in his convertible and faced with the insistent repetition on the radio of the advertisement he himself has made for the "Zephyr" tobacco company, he has a nervous breakdown and attempts to commit suicide by crashing into a lorry (Figure 2). He survives, slightly hurt and apparently suffering from speech loss.



Figure 1: Eddie Anderson has an impressive house, a pretty and attractive wife, and an exemplary daughter

This anxiety attack is the result of a double conflict: professional and personal. Despite his success and the income it affords him, his job as an advertising agent does not satisfy him. At university he had written poetry and he had wanted to devote his life to literature. In his personal life, and within the context of a mid-life crisis, he lives with a wife to whom he has been married for many years, whom he no longer loves. Meanwhile, he feels love and passion towards his latest lover, the young and independent Gwen (Faye Dunaway), a woman who inspires him and makes him react from his stupor through her, sometimes painful, sincerity (Figure 3). He is an inveterate womanizer and has kept this affair secret for months. As a result of his suicide attempt and because of the rejection he shows towards her, his wife suspects the affair, which she later confirms when she finds some pictures of her husband with his lover, both naked. After the accident, Eddie does not speak. Despite his total physical recovery he remains in total silence, recalling over and over in his imagination the moments he has shared with Gwen, mixing the woman's reality with the fantasy of the beloved one. He is visited by his relatives and bosses, who want him to go back to work, but he only breaks his silence to say that he is no longer going to work, that he is not going to carry on with his previous life. This unleashes a family and marriage crisis: his wife is not willing to change her status or lifestyle. He also becomes embroiled in a job crisis: his company does not want to lose him right in the middle of an important and costly advertising campaign.



Figure 2: The main character tries to commit suicide by crashing into a lorry



Figure 3: Gwen inspires love and passionpasión

Eddie suffers a second crisis when his father is admitted to hospital. When he visits him two lifestyles clash in his mind: that of his father, longing for success and money, and his own, that of a failed writer. His father was a rug trader who has fallen on hard times, authoritarian and sullen with his family, who admires his son not because of his job but because of his income. In addition, he recalls the conflict they had when he wished his son to follow in his steps in the rug business. His father does not want to spend his last days at the clinic and Eddie helps him to leave it and get home. Eddie meets his lover Gwen (Figure 4) again and begs her to come back to him when he discovers that he's going to become a father. This unleashes a new family crisis among Eddie, his wife, and his sister-in-law. The women want to put his father in a home, which they end up managing. Eddie sets fire to his house in an angry bout of catharsis to break away from his father's capitalist model, and to break symbolically with a past he wants to leave behind.



Figure 4: Eddie meets Gwen again

The last scene gathers all the characters together around the burial of Eddie's father. The differing lifestyles are reflected in it. Florence, after the divorce, and having kept most of the shared possessions, marries the family lawyer; his brother and his sister-in-law grow apart from him, rejecting his behaviour, and Eddie continues his unstable and turbulent relationship with Gwen; their future is uncertain but this is precisely what drives and inspires him in his "new lease" on life. (Figure 5).

Eddie's symptoms are framed within adapta-



Figure 5.- In the last scene all the characters are gathered at the burial of Eddie's father

tion disorders, within the subtype of adaptation disorders caused by social factors: partly by work, partly by family. According to the ICD-10 classification of mental and behavioural disorders, these disorders have a series of diagnostic criteria²:

A. The onset of emotional or behavioural symptoms in response to an identifiable stressful element. In the film, the conflict was with his job as an advertising agent and his adulterous relationship with Gwen.

B. These symptoms or behaviours are clinically expressed in the following way:

1. A more intense reaction than might be expected in response to the stressful element.

2. A significant deterioration in social relations or job performance. In the film this is reflected in Eddie's isolation at home and in his refusal to go back to work.

C. The stress-related alteration does not comply with the criteria for any other specific disorder and does not constitute a mere aggravation of a pre-existing disorder. Eddie apparently did not suffer from anything before the accident.

D. The symptoms are not due to grief.

E. Once the stressful element (or its consequences) has disappeared, the symptoms do not persist for longer than 6 months.

It must be specified whether the disorder is acute, if it lasts less than 6 months, or whether it is chronic, if it lasts 6 months or longer.

Adaptation disorders are coded by subtypes, which are selected according to the predominant symptoms (Figure 6). The specific stressful element can be pointed out on Axis IV², in the case of the

film, Eddie's pathology would be framed within diagnosis F43.25, since it presents a mood and a behavioural alteration: it caused a traffic accident, he flies around the company building in his plane, he hides at his childhood home and later goes down to the basement, where he finds the papers of his father's rug business, undergoes another nervous breakdown, and sets fire to the basement and therefore his father's house.

F43.20 With depressive mood [309.0]

F43.28 With anxiety [309.24]

F43.22 Mixed, with anxiety and depressive mood [309.28]

F43.24 With a behavioural disorder [309.3]

F43.25 With mixed alteration of emotions and behaviour [309.4]

F43.9 Non-specified [309.9]



Figure 6: Reflecting

One way of standardising and assessing the degree of psychosocial stress is by using the "Holmes and Rahe *Social Readjustment Rating Scale*"⁶, where the levels of stress to which an individual has been subjected to in the last 12 months are calculated. If the score is above 250 points it is advisable to take action. In the case of Eddie, the score according to the Holmes and Rahe scale is 327 (separation or divorce + loss of job + his father's illness + an abrupt change in family finances + a change in the type of job activity + a relationship with Gwen + a traffic accident + a change in personal habits), which is clearly above the 250-point limit established for the disorder (Table 2)⁷.

Eddie suffers from burnout syndrome. He is professionally exhausted by the advertising campaign he has carried out for Zephir tobacco, with which he personally disagrees, and because he feels that his company's economic expectations have been set upon

his shoulders. Personality factors also converge in him - he is competitive and under the influence of his father's business talent, but within him is the soul of a frustrated artist - and environmental factors - an exemplary family and wife, who he no longer loves, and a life full of luxury and comforts which does not satisfy him. In the first stage, he suffers from a depressive disorder. At first there is a predominance of lack-luster: he is not depressive, but he does show a lack of hope and motivation, together with physical and mental exhaustion, which do not seem to be counteracted by rest. Thus, he has grey hair, he is, apathic, silent, unkept, suffers insomnia, argues with his wife, etc. He later develops a neurotic reaction: he constantly ponders his problems (both job-related and personal, the conflict with his wife and his desire for Gwen who appears to him in a kind of self-limited illusion) and carries them with him everywhere, so that he never rests. His former life revolved around his work; constant lengthy meetings were invoked to explain away his affair with Gwen, causing him deep dissatisfaction. This is why his performance drops, and he develops a lack of interest, a lack of initiative, a loss of promotion-related enthusiasm and a lack of motivation. Eddie has a creative job, but one which is very influenced by economic profit (he tries to take up his work again but is overwhelmed by the statistics and economic data of "Zephir" tobacco), and becomes alienated, even though his job had satisfied his expectations up to his nervous breakdown. Among the symptoms he develops are irritability, aggression (he has constant arguments with Florence and Gwen) (Figure7), mood swings, inhibition of sexual desire, gastrointestinal alterations, insomnia (many of the rows and recurring thoughts take place at night), headaches, consumption and abuse of alcohol and other substances, and exhaustion.

Depending on the type of job-generated stress, a classification of burnout workers can be established. In the case of our protagonist, competitiveness stress is present, which is typical of business-



Figure 7: Eddie and Florence's relationship

Table 2. Holmes and Rahe Psychosocial Stress Scale (Modified)⁷

1	Death of spouse	100
2	Marital separation or divorce	70
3	Judicial proceedings or serious legal problems which could end in imprisonment	68
4	Death of a close family member	65
5	Personal injury or illness requiring confinement in bed	55
6	Marriage	50
7	Dismissal from work	47
8	Job retirement	45
9	Marital reconciliation	45
10	Change in health of family member or noticeable improvement in a relative's chronic illness	44
11	Breach of an engagement or similar relationship	42
12	Pregnancy	40
13	Gain a new family member	39
14	Death of a friend	38
15	Abrupt change in family finances (positive or negative)	38
16	Company readjustment or labour disputes at the company where one works	38
17	Change in the kind of work	38
18	Loan or mortgage of more than six thousand euros	38
19	Wife becomes pregnant	35
20	Radical change (by more or less) in the number of family arguments	35
21	Falling in love or beginning a new close and deep friendship	34
22	Loss of husband or wife's job	33
23	Moving house	32
24	Change of workplace	31
25	Accident or situation of physical violence	30
26	A member of the family leaves the family home	30
27	Wife starts to stop working away from home	29
28	Fights or disagreements with neighbours or relatives who do not live at the family home (or disappearance of a habitual state of conflict)	28
29	Considerable personal success	28
30	Exams	27
31	Promotion at work	27
32	Fights or disagreements with colleagues and workmates (or disappearance of a habitual state of conflict)	26
33	Major house refurbishing	25
34	Noticeable deterioration of the home or neighbourhood	25
35	Change in personal habits (going out, dress, lifestyle, etc.)	24
36	Significant change in timetable or working conditions	23
37	Change in religious views	22
38	Change in political views	22
39	Alterations in social life (to a greater or lesser extent) apart from possible changes in personal habits or ways	20
40	Change in the mode or duration of sleep	18
41	Change in the frequency of family gatherings	17
42	Change in eating habits or appetite	16
43	Holidays away from home	15
44	Christmas celebrations or their equivalent	13
45	Minor legal problems (including traffic sanctions)	11

men and executives (because he is an executive at the advertising company), together with creativity stress, typical of writers, artists and researchers (because he is an advertising agent and has been taking part in the Zephyr tobacco project) and relational stress, typical of teachers, public servants and shop assistants (because he has been in direct contact with clients and executives belonging to his company). Other “stressing” disorders are those of responsibility (doctors, nurses, air-traffic controllers), urgency (journalists), expectation (police officers), fear (high-risk workers, forces of law and order), boredom (jobs which are divided into sections, mechanical or monotonous) and loneliness (housewives)⁸. Eddie’s personality type influences the development of his adaptation disorder because of his high degree of perfectionism; this can be seen in his dress, his high self-expectations, his idealism and his strong tendency to throw himself into his job.

The film and the novel it is based on are by Elia Kazan and in them we can see a clear autobiographical inspiration. The main character is of Greek origin; Elia Kazan was born in the bosom of a family belonging to the Greek minority of Istanbul. Eddie’s father is a former rug trader who has fallen on hard times; Kazan’s father emigrated to America and traded in rugs, but became ruined in the Great Crash of 1929. The main character is professionally successful, Elia Kazan won his first Oscar with *Gentleman’s Agreement* in 1947; was nominated in 1951 for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and won his second for *On the Waterfront* in 1954, but was never pleased with his life. He suffered the scorn of the cinematographic community because of his supposed relationship with actors and theatre-people related to the communist party, leading him to have to testify twice before the Un-American Activities Committee. He later tried to redeem himself by explaining the behaviour of the communist party by disguising it as criminal Mafia in *On the Waterfront* (1954). Like its main character (Eddie Anderson), Elia Kazan broke up, in his case unintentionally, with his former relationship when he lost his wife Molly Day Tacher in 1963, 4 years later marrying the actress and director Bárbara Loden, who was much younger than himself. Like Eddie Anderson, he left behind a successful life. His next film, *The visitors* (1972), was the first one he made outside the Hollywood industry but it bombed and is a minor film in his filmography.

From a stylistic and purely cinematographic point of view, *The Arrangement* is a work of his times. He uses a succession of close-ups; he mixes real images

with cartoons (remember when Eddie pictures saving Gwen from the arms of one of her lovers, and he fights him like Batman does in the TV series); there are flashbacks of Gwen and Eddie’s relationship, both of them partially naked, and even one of Florence, blurred by the curtains, while she undresses in an attempt to attract her husband to her again. The film has a clearly theatrical stage design. There are few settings: the inside of the hospital, of the mansion and of the family home. He fictitiously compares three “Eddie’s”: the student who struggles to become a writer with the support of his mother and the rejection of his father; the executive, with his worldly worries, and the last one, who seeks an answer to his problems. This resource was also used in *Smultronstället* (1957), by Ingmar Bergman.



American poster

2.- *The Green Pastures*

Technical details

Title: *The Green Pastures*

Original title: *Las verdes praderas*

Country: Spain

Year: 1979

Director: José Luis Garci

Music: Ludwig Van Beethoven

Photography: Fernando Arribas

Film editor: Miguel González Sinde

Screenplay: José Luis Garci and José María González Sinde.

Cast: Alfredo Landa, María Casanova, María Casanova, Carlos Larrañaga, Ángel Picazo, Irene Gutiérrez Caba, Pedro Díez del Corral, Cecilia Roth, Enrique Vivó, Jesús Enguita, Norma Aleandro, David Sinde, Elvira Sánchez, José Luis Merino, Pedro Burmester, Mario Siles, Joe Camroy and Antonio Passy.

Color: Color

Runtime: 100 minutes

Genre: Drama, Comedy

Production companies: José Luis Tafur P.C.

Synopsis: At the company where he works as an executive, José is creating a new advertisement which seems to be a success whichever way you look at it, thanks to the spontaneous talent of the village man who comes up with the right expression, a talent which José possesses.

<http://imdb.com/title/tt0080090>

José Rebolledo (Alfredo Landa) has a good job at “La confianza”, an insurance company, and his wife, Conchi (María Casanova), truly loves him (Figure 8). They can afford a few indulgences and they have bought a chalet in the mountains near Madrid where they spend the weekends in the company of family and friends, doing sports activities and having barbecues. However, beyond this apparent happiness lies a feeling of deep frustration brought about by the lifestyle they have chosen. José does not manage to fit into this scene of bourgeois comfort and he decides to break with it.



Figure 8: José and Conchi

The Green Pastures is José Luis Garci's sixth film, the one which closed his production in the seventies of the 20th century after *Mi Marilyn* (1975), *Al fútbol* (1975), *Tiempo de gente acobardada* (1976), *Unfinished Business/ Asignatura pendiente* (1977) and *Alone in the Dark/ Solos en la madrugada* (1978). It is also the third collaboration between Garci and Sinde and

the first one between the director and the Landa-Casanova tandem. This film analyses the development of the middle class during the Spanish transition to Democracy and the development of fierce communism such as we know it nowadays.

The character played by Alfredo Landa shows the first symptoms of a worker suffering from burnout, a social anxiety disorder caused by the progressive acquisition of properties and social ties, - some of them undesired, as is the case of football matches with work colleagues, or barbecues with neighbours-, which little by little imprison him within a narrowing socio-familial circle. In the character of Eddie Anderson from *The Arrangement*, the social anxiety disorder takes place after years of living amidst the greatest of comforts and the best of worldly goods, and this capital-property-satisfaction model settled in the Spain of the late 70s and has lasted up to the present (the future is now very uncertain). Garci's film analyses the situation with great accuracy.

Returning to the plot, José's worries devour his soul and his mind and bring about the outcome, which takes place during a weekend the family spends at the mountain chalet, (it is filmed at the Las Praderas" housing estate "in Cerceda in Madrid). He cannot imagine that thousands of interferences and a number of other problems (with his wife, his boss, his mother-in-law, his future brother-in-law) will cause his peace and quietness to gradually vanish, evolving towards a somewhat violent environment. When the weekend is over and the family begins the journey back to Madrid he returns and sets fire to the chalet (Figure 9). Only then does he happily return to the car where his wife and children are waiting for him, all of them ready to begin a new life. In this film fire represents a ritual element, by which -and through the destruction of the Rebolledo house- he struggles to



Figure 9: The purifying fire

free himself from a routine that torments him and to avoid one day dying in bitterness and unhappiness, like one of his friends and work colleagues of whom he has spoken to his wife that same afternoon while they were walking in the pine forest, after realising that all they had been fighting for since they were young was nothing but a mirage. José opens his heart to his wife in the pine forest and confesses in a memorable monologue that he is weary of his job but above all he is weary of the kind of life they lead, influenced by properties, which provide comfort but which physically bind him, like the chalet and the weekend social gatherings, and he realises that this is not what he expected from life and that, at age 43, it is not what he desires for the future.

The act of burning the chalet is a symbol representing a “break” with the past and a “rebirth” starting from scratch. This symbolic element is also used in *The Arrangement* when Eddie takes refuge in his parents’ house and burns the business documents belonging to his father’s ruinous rug company, and the fire later spreads to destroy the paternal house where Eddie spent the first years of his life (Figure 10). This rite involves the destruction of a lifestyle he no longer desires; an act of rebellion against a father who did not allow him to develop his artistic interests as a writer. It is a way of breaking with the past.

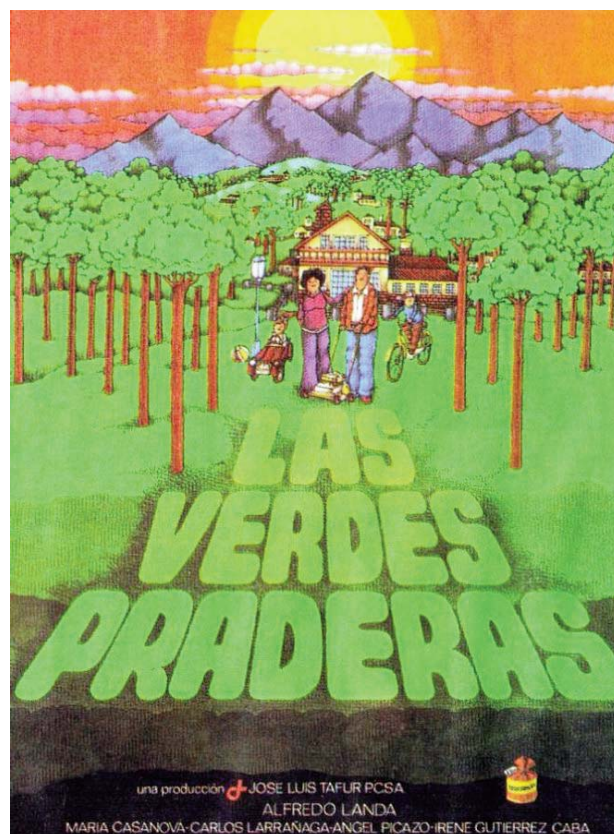


Figure 10: Eddie burns his parents’ house

3.- *The Age of Ignorance*

Technical details

Title: *The Age of ignorance*
Original title: *L’âge des ténèbres*
Country: Canada
Year: 2007
Director: Denys Arcand
Music: Philippe Miller
Photography: Guy Dufaux
Film editor: Isabelle Dedieu
Screenplay: Denys Arcand
Color: Color



Spanish poster

Runtime: 104 minutes

Genre: Comedy

Production companies: Cinémaginaire Inc. and Mon Voisin Productions

Synopsis: In his dreams, Jean-Marc (Marc Labrèche) is a knight in shining armour, a stage and screen star, a successful novelist who has women at his feet. In the real world, he is a nobody, a pen-pusher, an insignificant husband, and a failed parent who secretly smokes. But Jean-Marc manages to resist without succumbing to the temptation of his dream world and decides to give the real world another try.

<http://imdb.com/title/tt0819953>

This film analyses in a witty, sometimes brilliant, way the absurdities and contradictions of western lifestyle, present-day broken homes, the alienating and dehumanising life of the main character, the capitalist model and the decline of the medieval feudal model. Directed by Canadian film maker Denys Arcand based on his own screenplay, it closes the trilogy he began with *The Decline of the American Empire/ Le déclin de l’empire américain* (1986) and continued with *The Barbarian Invasions/ Les invasions barbares* (2003).

Denys Arcand carries out this analysis through the character of Jean-Marc Leblanc, who is

splendidly portrayed by Marc Labrèche, a comic actor with a considerable amount of experience. Jean-Marc is a mediocre man in general and in every aspect of his life.

Leblanc works as a civil servant at the “Citizens’ Rights Dept.”, of the Québec government (Figure 11), an “Orwellian” state institution invaded by political correctness. In the building where he works there is a true persecution of smokers by the security staff. The defence of what is “politically correct” is illustrated in an incident, the one caused by Jean Marc when he tells his Afro-American colleague that he “works like a nigger”, because of which sanctioning proceedings are started against him. The film represents in a very clear way the public administration system that inevitably seems to hamper the citizens’ demands in a department that is supposed to “help” them. These Québec offices are provisionally located in the football stadium. They are a labyrinth of corridors and offices managed by the security guard. In them, civil servant Leblanc demands an endless stream of documents from the uncomplaining taxpayers who seek social benefits for personal problems.



Figure 11: The Office of Citizen Defence of the Government of Québec

Arcand intends to show the exacerbation of totalitarian drifts in the Western states, above all in those situated in North America, and the attitude of certain companies that fluctuates between paternalism and fascist or Kafkian bureaucratisation (generating more and more fear, coveting more and more security). Jean Marc listens to the citizens’ complaints coldly, with no moral implications, and tries to clarify the way to solve them, but other times he withdraws into his imaginary world where he is really himself. He has a good circle of colleagues, but his boss is constantly reprimanding him for his delays. He lives in a residential area on the outskirts of the city; to get to work he has to drive for 20 minutes, then take a 45-minute train journey and finally get on the underground for another 20 minutes. And this every day. On top of everything, the houses of his housing estate are small

castles that serve to isolate neighbours from each other.

Leblanc does not hold a distinguished position; from a personal point of view he is only a civil servant of the state government. In contrast, his wife is a successful real estate agent who spends the whole film talking on the phone with her clients or her boss (who is occasionally her lover). The relationship with his wife is non-existent; she never listens to him or has sex with him because of her hectic professional activities. His daughters ignore him because they are busy with game consoles or music sets, and they are only interested in consuming or satisfying their own needs (Figure 12). On top of all this, his mother is dying in a home. Within this subplot, Arcand again places emphasis on “therapeutic cruelty”, as he did in his previous film *The Barbarian Invasions*, when he succinctly displays Jean Marc’s wish for active or passive euthanasia so that his mother would no longer have to suffer.



Figure 12: Leblanc and his family

This emotional emptiness leads Leblanc to escape from routine through his dreams. He imagines that he is a brave knight, the lover of a media star or a successful writer surrounded by beautiful women. In his fantasy world he is really himself, since he satisfies his sexual, affective and emotional desires through these female characters. There are three lovers: the successful actress, who represents aesthetic beauty, glamour and success; the nymphomaniac and exhibitionist journalist, who satisfies his desires; and the colleague who best fulfils his desire for domination. When he is overwhelmed by boredom he takes refuge in his oneiric world which he is reluctant to leave. It is a means of escape from the problems which he does not want to confront because of the inertia of his state of apathy. Faced with the impossibility of living in the present, in reality, he develops the need for a childish escape to the world of fantasy. Leblanc has nothing in his everyday life. He loathes his wife, he hates his job, he is ignored by his daughters..., and the

possibility of fantasising about a fame he does not possess, sex he does not have, and love and understanding keep him active and alive.

Eventually, the gradual deterioration in his mother's illness undermines his spirits (Figure 13). This, together with his wife's unfaithfulness, determines his attempt to solve his state of professional, social and personal apathy. He leaves his position as a well-off but bored civil servant, he separates from his wife, and he moves into his mother's small wooden house. All this is a reflection of the nostalgia he suffers in his desire to return to "what is authentic" as opposed to so much pretence. It is a return to his origins, to his mother's house facing the sea, to simple manual work and to the slow and calm life of the crafts industry.

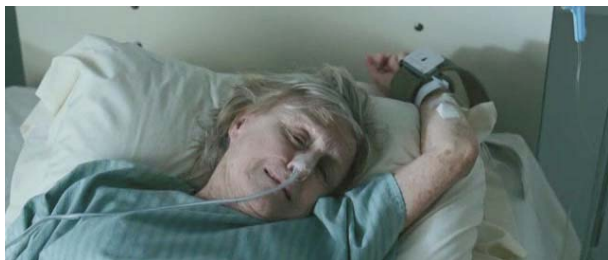


Figure 13.- His mother's illness undermines Jean-Marc's spirits

Finally, in a gesture of maturity he abandons his imaginary lovers to be able to really confront his life alone.

There is an interlude in the film, when Jean Marc separates from his wife, where he tries to rebuild his life through capitalist-consumerist codes, and at a fast-dating service (all of the women present only interested in his financial and social status) he meets a woman who is obsessed with the medieval world and who encourages him to dress in the attire of those times and attend a country meeting of "anoraks", fighting in an unequal combat for the lady's hand. This segment tries to symbolise Jean Marc's world of evasive fantasy and the gradual "medievalisation" of the West, crusades and crusaders, mental and real walls everywhere, inaccessibility to enjoyment...

Final considerations

It is difficult to analyse the social problem of "Mobbing"; in our environment, psychological abuse leaves its victims defenceless owing to a lack of knowledge about the issue and a lack of scientific studies addressing the psychosocial risks of this kind of harass-



French poster

ment. The social changes which have taken place in the work place (greater flexibility), and outside it (the incorporation of women into the job force, increases in the number of divorces, and difficulties in making family and professional life compatible), have led stress to become a social and public health problem⁵.

"It is a complex phenomenon, which contains several psychological, social, ethical, and legal factors that can also be triggered by the worker's refusal to be manipulated by one or more members of the group"⁴.

"In most cases harassment affects brilliant workers who are highly appreciated, formal and participative; active people with a strong personality, who are made out to be unintelligent, lazy and problematic"⁴. There is a significant relation between having suffered the effect of a stressful event in life and mental pathology, and the risk of suffering some kind of mental pathology increases as the intensity of the stressful factor increases¹. Patients with alexithymia, type A personality and psychosocial stress levels above 350 (on the Holmes and Rahe Psychosocial Stress Scale) would form a subgroup of patients with an increased risk of presenting organic pathology (high blood pressure, acute myocardial infarction, cere-

brovascular accident, etc.) and/or severe mental pathology, which makes their examination obligatory⁹.

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