Gilles Carle and

La Vraie Nature de Bernadette

Saintly Sinner,
Sinful Saint

While provocative and intellectually challenging, 73-year-old Gilles Carle is also anti-elitist to the core. Perhaps because his early life wasn’t limited to the upscale arts milieu, he never thought he lowered himself by shooting a beer commercial or doing a television movie. A few years ago, he told me about chorus boy gigs such as dancing “a Greek slave in an Egyptian ballet, and an Egyptian slave in a Greek ballet,” not to mention appearing on the same bill as legendary Quebec stripper, Lily Saint-Cyr. It’s typical of Carle to add that he was a mediocre dancer who joined a ballet company “mostly to get in contact with girls.”

An art student, a journalist and a graphic artist, Carle found his true vocation in his 30s at the NFB, where he wrote and directed his first feature, La Vie heureuse du Léopold Z. in 1965. A few years later, he left the institution to make his next picture, Le Viol d’une jeune fille douce (1968), helping to finance it by directing, according to newspaper columnist Nathalie Petrowski, 108 commercials in one year. In the decades that followed, Carle churned out 30-plus movies, which included an extravagantly kitsch musical (Fantastica, 1980), classic Québécois schmaltz (Les Plouffe, 1981), a quick-witted documentary on chess (Jouer sa vie, 1982) and homegrown surrealism (Pudding chômeur, 1996), a candy-coloured tribute to the underclass. Whatever the genre and the relative seriousness of intent, Carle’s work is always vivid, effervescent and sometimes unapologetically lurid. One of the country’s first directors to earn decent box-office returns, Carle’s then lover, Carole Laure (who premiered her own directorial debut, Les Fils de Marie, at this year’s Cannes Film Festival). In Bûcheron, the self-confident, frequently naked enfant sauveur gave off star aura during a period when Canada’s film culture suffered from a weird hang-up about the legitimacy of his/her middle-class existence, Bernadette displays admirable commitment and heroic stamina. At the same time, she’s a preposterous Utopian, Carle’s distinctly Québécois spoof of 1960s and 1970s baby boomers who thought they could save their souls by pulling on cow’s udders and shovelling manure. In one scene, the strict vegetarian delivers a fatuous lecture on the sublime beauty of Polynesian mothers who teach their kids to masturbate.

When Gilles Carle came up with his most indelible character, the wilful protagonist of La Vraie Nature de Bernadette (1972), he thought at first Carole Laure would play the part, which she coveted. But one morning, in downtown Montreal, he met Micheline Lancôt, who was then a film animator with no acting experience. Carle refers to the chance encounter as “a miracle,” explaining to me during a recent interview that Lancôt’s beauty and aura of serene purposefulness was a perfect match for “the character I had in my head. I didn’t know her, I had never spoken to her. But I saw in her an elegance, and gradually, I began to visualize her in a landscape.” Carole Laure’s screen persona—the raven-haired, feral nymph—was replaced by another kind of female charisma. At any rate, Lancôt became Bernadette Brown, a bourgeois woman determined to drop out of urban middle-class life and reinvent herself.

La Vraie Nature de Bernadette provokes the viewer with its irreverence, its ambiguities, its tonal shifts between farce and melancholy. Like Fellini—but on a more modest scale—Carle mixes the ridiculous with the sublime, rubs the sacred against the profane. The movie opens on a series of tight point-of-view shots that put you in Bernadette’s red shoes as she shuts down her life in a Montreal apartment and takes off for Oz, a farmhouse where she plans to raise her child on clean air and simple living. In her passionate need to escape the banality of her middle-class existence, Bernadette displays admirable commitment and heroic stamina. At the same time, she’s a preposterous Utopian, Carle’s distinctly Québécois spoof of 1960s and 1970s baby boomers who thought they could save their souls by pulling on cow’s udders and shovelling manure. In one scene, the strict vegetarian delivers a fatuous lecture on the sublime beauty of Polynesian mothers who teach their kids to masturbate.
Carle was no schlockmeister. His movies bridged the gap between soft-porners and film artists on whose radar screen viewer approval was a distant blip.

In the picture’s second scene, Bernadette speeds along a country road, high-energy fiddle music on the soundtrack. Then abruptly, the road to Utopia is blocked by a tractor belonging to the movie’s resident Doubting Thomas (Carle regular Donald Pilon). Thomas refuses to get out of the way, either for Bernadette or other broadly caricatured locals, including a dubious village mayor (Robert Rivard). Before it’s even begun, the pastoral idyll has devolved into a vehicular pileup out of Godard’s Weekend. Her liquid eyes wide open, dressed in a prim lace blouse and Victorian pin, Bernadette is confronted by a nasty view of the bucolic countryside. Thomas, who turns out to be her new neighbour, has blocked the road to protest the destruction of his village by crippling debt to faceless entities—price-lowering supermarket chains—and government indifference.

As the movie continues, our heroine struggles to keep her 1960s dream alive, despite the grim realities that impinge on her via characters like Madeleine (Claudette Delormier), a mini-skirted whore whose son (Gilles Lajoie) can’t walk or talk; Rock (Reynald Bouchard), a painfully vulnerable young man who suggests Norman Bates with a limp; and two gun-slinging cowboy thugs ironically named Saint-Luc (Yvon Barette) and Saint-Marc (Yves Allaire). Ultimately, Bernadette’s education—in a movie that ends with a funeral—brings her to an understanding that the “country” is no sanctuary from isolation, death or evil.

What’s more, the picture’s rural landscape is far from Renoireseque, and the house Bernadette has acquired turns to be a leaky, ramshackle dump, populated by a mangy old horse. Shot in Cap-St-Ignace, near St–Gabriel–de–Brandon, La Vraie Nature portrays a raw and homely countryside reminiscent of other Carle movies. Scrubby front yards are cluttered with junk; you can practically smell the dank earth and dog shit. And fires on her tormentors, a banner reading “eat shit” fluttering behind her. Carle’s Bernadette also gets fed up with the true believers who threaten to smother her. And paralleling the 19th-century’s Bernadette Soubirous of Lourdes, the 1970s Bernadette Brown of Quebec gets harassed by the authorities.

Once the heroine of Carle’s movie resists these intrusions, we are presented with the movie’s penultimate image. A blue, Madonna-like shawl on her head, she takes aim with a rifle and fires on her tormentors, a banner reading “eat shit” fluttering behind her. Carle’s saint, who resolutely denies her sainthood, is armed. Her bravery and the force of her personality are unquestionable. And yet, is she a saint or a sinner? A brave warrior against human mendacity, or a crazy buffoon slipping on her own banana peel? Is she conducting a narcissistic experiment on herself? What’s the true nature of Bernadette?

Postscript

When I interviewed Carle in April, the day after Saint Bernadette of Lourdes’s feast day, he had to make an effort to answer my questions about La Vraie Nature, which screened in the official selection at Cannes in 1972, and was designated a masterwork by the Audio–Visual Preservation Trust of Canada just last year. Since the early 1990s, Carle has had Parkinson’s disease. Today, despite the illness, he continues to paint and draw his buoyant, often erotic fantasies. With his assistant Francine Saita, he’s close to completing a new script, Mona McGil et son vieux père malade, and with Chloé Sainte-Marie, he speaks out for the Quebec branch of the Parkinson Society of Canada, which among other activities, seeks funding for what many hope will be the final push toward a cure.