

# Gilles Carle and *La Vraie Nature de Bernadette* Saintly Sinner, Sinful Saint



Gilles Carle

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, he believes in giving moviegoers a good ride. For instance, *La Mort d'un bûcheron* (1973) offered up the lubricious beauty of 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 sauvage* gave off star aura during a period when Canada's film culture suffered from a weird hang-up about the imagination, not to speak of sexual glamour.

Not unlike David Cronenberg's early films, Carle's work was an affront to institutional rectitude of the 1970s. And like Cronenberg, he gravitated to producers and distributors who were knocking-off blatantly commercial attempts at audience-pleasers. But 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. A social satirist driven to celebrate the vitality of regular folk, and mock the hypocrisy of elites, Carle breathed life into subsequent generations of Québécois films by directors such as André Forcier, Robert Morin, Charles Binamé and Louis Bélanger. Pictures like *Red* (1970) are packed with speeding cars, strippers, erect nipples, abandoned lovers, country meadows, farmhouses, guns, violent deaths, critiques of middle-class corruption and jarring religious allusions. Simultaneous-

ly titillating and self-satirizing, they join Felliniesque absorption with gesture, movement and physiognomy to spaghetti-western jolts. Moreover, with their various riddles and contradictions, Carle's movies seek out what he has termed "the secret order of things."

At the rapidly beating heart of many Gilles Carle films, there's a recurring presence. She's pretty, powerful and stubbornly defiant, even when pimped, battered and otherwise oppressed. Explosively impulsive, the Carle woman throws off her clothes and fucks at the drop of a cowboy hat. She's a mythic creature in some private religion, and she tends to be incarnated by her creator's real-life women. She's Carole Laure, and then she's Carle's *compagne* of many years, singer/actress Chloé Sainte-Marie. As he once wrote, "The participation of women in my films—women with whom I lived and loved—is essential. They gave me almost everything."

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 Lanctôt, 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 Lanctôt'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, Lanctôt 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.



La Vraie Nature de Bernadette

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 Renoiresque, 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. Unlike more conventional Québécois films, including Carle's own *Maria Chapdelaine* (1983), there are only brief flashes of bucolic lyricism. The movie's overriding irony is that the beautiful Acadia Bernadette imagined in her Montreal apartment doesn't exist. Nevertheless, amid the mud and dung, her dignity and resolution rarely waver, and she becomes oddly nurturing and protective for the clownish bumpkins Carle portrays with affection, no matter how greedy and lecherous they might be. Bernadette preaches respect for animals and old people. She consoles the lame and the emotionally broken. She takes care of Madeleine's infirm child, and saves the life of a pig called Hector. Most of all, Bernadette, who out of the blue does an uncanny impression of a horse's whinny, has sex with every male in sight, and in one scene delights an old farmer (Maurice Beaupré) with an expert hand job.

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This and other blessings fuel a legend around Bernadette. Then Madeleine's son walks and talks and water appears where there was none before. In a crucial moment, an elderly recipient of Bernadette's carnal grace kneels and gives her flowers. And with the mysteriously incongruous movements of an airport runway signaller, Bernadette shakes the flora and fills the air with pollen fluff, an image hinting at sacred signs and .

The real-life Saint Bernadette of Lourdes—the subject of several films including Henry King's *The Song of Bernadette* (1943)—was a strong-willed country girl who lived in a hovel and encountered the Virgin Mary in a garbage-strewn grotto. A bringer of healing water, she soon found herself pursued by believers in her sanctity and tormented by officials who hounded her with police interrogations. 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?

#### TAKE ONE

#### 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 Saïa, he's close to completing a new script, *Mona McGill 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.