

FILM REVIEWS



Drawing by Gilles Carle

Gilles Carle's **La Mort d'un Bûcheron** treats the subject of Québec allegorically as a young woman who is searching for her parenthood and unsure of her future. She will, at present, fill any role that's asked of her, short of complete

prostitution.

Beginning with **The Rape of a Sweet Young Girl** (1968) and developed to a fine point, following his films **Red** and **Les Mâles**, with **The True Nature of Bernadette** (1972), Carle's style has

been to use his actresses not simply as straight symbols for Québec, but as metaphors for the way the people envision her.

In 1968 he saw her as indifferently exploited, a young girl carrying the

future as a pregnancy, "protected" by her wildly comic and dangerous Americanized brothers, and still undecided as to who should play father to her young child. In *Bernadette* he saw Québec as older, more experienced; a beautiful, generous female hoping to find all the answers in love and kindness; suddenly forced to defend herself and joining the "doubting Thomas" when the people begin to exploit her as a miracle-worker.

And now we see the latest of Carle's comments on Québec in what is likely a trilogy of descriptive impressionistic films. Here it is Pauline Julien, a Québec star and well-known political figure and emancipated woman, who carries the future as a pregnancy (significantly it is fathered by an accountant) while the heroine and metaphorical figure of Québec, played by Carole Laure, is called Marie Chapdelaine, the name of the historical heroine of Louis Hermon's 1913 novel.

This Marie Chapdelaine is a beautiful part-Indian innocent who has left her northern mother to search Montreal for her long-missing lumberjack father. While in Montreal she encounters an assortment of peculiarly distinctive French-Canadian types who join her search for their own reasons. The popular assumptions that every Québécois has a lumberjack or some Indian blood somewhere in his background and that you can find *anything* in Montreal, are generously acknowledged.

Other influences are acknowledged too. Carole Laure, as Marie, is sometimes photographed to look like Hollywood's Natalie Wood, sometimes like Québec's Geneviève Bujold, and sometimes like an Indian. Her changing appearance reflects what each character wants her to be, or how they see her. Carle carefully draws his parallel between Marie and Québec as exploitable bodies with different meanings and values to each of the typical Québécois illustrated.

Names are given the characters according to the theatrical convention that once gave the stage such names as Mrs. Malaprop and Madame Proboscis. Puns and double-entendres are everywhere. Marie, for instance, meets a handsome intellectual (ex-lumberjack of course) editor of *Pulp and Paper* (what else!) in a library — he's named François Paradis, the same as Marie Chapdelaine's lover in the novel; you can find him in any library. The pulp and paper motif

continues as Marie's father's mistress turns up, named Blanche Bellefeuille, complete with all the implications that the story has yet to be told on this once beautiful blank page of Québec's history, or that nothing is written. Similarly Marie's mother's old friend, the nightclub owner who employs Marie as a topless cowboy singer, is Armand St. Amour, and the lumberjack cook, the sole witness to the past and the fate of Marie's father, is Ti-noir L'Esperance, a shady hope? Your guess is as good or better than mine, and certainly more fun to make. The point is that these names make it obvious that Carle wishes his audience, no matter how dumb or lazy, not to miss the point of his allegory.

The style of the film is familiar to Gilles Carle fans. It is a collage of effects, witty, satirical, serious, sensual, ridiculous and fanciful. Not often dull. Sequences are generally briskly directed (though I felt an occasional drag), and combine like a patchwork quilt. And like a good country-style quilt, they cover the subject. While close examination discloses a mish-mash, a crazy quilt of mixed styles, uneven in quality and without apparent overall pattern, nevertheless the total effect is warm and charming and effective.

The performers are excellent, despite the difficulties in acting out allegorical roles. Willie Lamôthe as St. Amour achieves a unique characterization encompassing helpful, indifferent, loving, brutal, threatening, patient and observant qualities all with ease. But all the characters demonstrate flexibility of reactions to Marie, because all Québécois shift their feelings toward themselves, their search, their hopes and their reality with just such typically human attitudes. Carole Laure, as Marie, has the difficult role of playing everyone's magic mirror, while creating a real existence. Critical complaints that you cannot really tell what she is like seem to suggest that the critic may have just missed the whole point of the film. It's hard to imagine missing pretty Marie as historical Québec with "her skin like an Indian, body like a Swede," as she's described.

Technically the film is proficient; Carle wrote (with Arthur Lamôthe), directed and edited it himself. He is so self-confident he can use background sounds to irritate, deliberately interrupt music for a point, exploit his actress as

he uses her to illustrate his exploited land, and mock several camera techniques (fashion photography, animated nude centre-fold action, routine cross cutting) while telling his tale of Marie's backward progress. The result is rather like someone tap-dancing while delivering a serious speech on politics, and slowly stripping off their clothes. Or someone else's. Certainly not boring.

Reception has been mixed. Frankly I suspect Carle rather resented the success of *Bernadette* in English Canada and resolved not to let that happen again. Just a guess. Anyhow, in France, where he is acknowledged as an important filmmaker and his films have long runs, opinion was divided between those who found it his best work and those who felt it was a badly flawed masterpiece and disliked his use of *joual*. The *Globe* and *Star* critics in Toronto panned it. I liked it well enough but found the basic statements now over-familiar, and the zippy panache of the tale less fresh and surprising naturally, with each repetition of this technique, than I did at first. But then the film was never made for me.

It was made strictly for the Québécois in a very literal sense. It is in fact astonishingly arrogant in two ways. On one hand, Carle seems to say, this film is made for ourselves, we don't need your American, European or English-Canadian markets, we can afford our own movies; while on the other he appears to offer every commercial inducement, lots of breasts and skin, a bloody opener and a mystery, deliberately to attract the Québécois and anyone else who wants to pay their money and take a look.

It has played successfully all year in Québec.

Slipstream

This is a movie for sound freaks. There are color, tone and sound harmonies here in some really remarkable combinations, sensual and direct, right to the centre of you. If you're open and you don't go to the movies just to be told little stories, *Slipstream* will put a lot of sound around you and harmonize it with the colors and scenes in front of you for some very electric pleasures.

In fact, there hasn't been sound like this, sweeping and swirling, whispering, humming, echoing the visuals, interpreting the sky, the grass, the plains, blending, harmonizing, accenting the colors;

well, there hasn't been much innovative sound in movies at all almost since the days when Welles in *Citizen Kane* showed us what a radio-trained man could do with voices on film. Congratulations for Best Sound (Canadian Film Awards) to Alan Lloyd and Brian Ahern, who produced and arranged the music and effects, and to Van Morrison and Eric Clapton and all the groups and performers whose talents were so well used here.

It is also a movie about space, inner space and physical space; about electronics; about how sound connects space; how electronics enables man to connect his world with sounds (voices, music, communication) as the blowing singing wind binds the world of nature.

The story is a tale of a man deeply concerned with preserving his integrity. A disc jockey, Mike Mallard, lives alone in the Grand Coulee country of Alberta in a remote farmhouse from which he broadcasts his popular nightly show over the telephone lines. He is physically isolated yet electronically connected to the contemporary world, living a kind of Walden trip in the wilderness, with the wind and his music sounding the limits of his space. He defies the station manager, who represents the bullying forces of business, and maintains a steady solid personal integrity by refusing to play music he considers crap. And he defies domestication also, when an attractive casual girl leaves her communal friends to move in with him and attempts to curtail his single-minded devotion to himself, and symbolically curtain his view.

Naturally the results of his stubborn and unflinching determination to remain separate from, uninvolved with, and yet connected to our world climaxes in his final separation into madness and imposed isolation. But the paths the film takes to reach this dénouement are meandering, disconnected and inadequately shaped in literary terms, though the visual and audial clues are sensitive and subtle.

Marc Champion's camerawork is particularly fine. Whereas in my opinion Don Wilder's award-winning photography in *Paperback Hero* was talented but misused, too pretty, often out of synch with the emotional qualities of the scenes and only deserved an award on a most superficial basis, Champion's work in *Slipstream* unites the visuals in sensitive harmonies with the sounds and

story to produce memorable effects that amplify rather than dilute the statement of the film.

I was moved and delighted for instance with the use of the camera to illustrate the naturalness of Kathy and Mike's new love. The nude lovers were only part of a scene in which the camera examined the undulating body of the Alberta hills lovingly, catching a flurry of grass on the smooth flank of the hillside with such sensitivity that I felt as if I was seeing the soft hairs rise on a great warm arm. This shot tied the sensuality of the lovers to nature and then gradually diminished them in a long shot until they were distant figures blending into the landscape. A scene like this is certainly worth 1000 words, and that's just as well, for the 1000 words aren't there.

The film's greatest weakness is the plot, dialogue, the script itself. Somehow it must be possible to string together these painterly visuals and interpretive sounds without using distracting and flattening vocabulary in a story that is too puny to carry the heavy weight of the theme. Perhaps it would work with Greek masks, or poetic drama, or Wagnerian music? Or would it be better to ignore the dialogue altogether? A silent film with sound? Interesting to note that Acoma said in the interview in the last *Cinema Canada* that "My next film will have less of a story line, and maybe less acting."

The acting itself is acceptable, considering the script. Luke Askew, an American import looking like a Charleston Heston of the seventies, plays Mike Mallard as a poetic, strong-minded, tightly together male, with solid competence. Eli Rill (another American, but he's been here awhile, still, good lord will we ever recognize ourselves when we see the *real thing* — there IS a difference!) adequately creates the demanding, bombastic and crude station manager, while Patti Oatman's Kathy is overpowered by the sounds, the visuals, the shouts of Rill and the remote silences of Askew to such an extent that her performance, lacking vivacity, is dull and flat and suits the treatment her character receives in the story.

The rest of the characterizations (members of Kathy's communal house) have been criticized for amateurishness and awkwardness yet I think they are quite reasonably performed. Perhaps it is their unfamiliar Canadianishness, a

kind of small-town hip, that embarrasses. More likely, however, it is the awkward use of them in the story.

As a background for Kathy they only serve to formalize what we already know of her, that she is a searching drifter seeking an alternate to the everyday working life, and that her relationships flit rather than burrow. Her role isn't strong enough to command our interest in exploring her moves and motivations, and therefore the extended view into part of her former life in the house in town doesn't seem really relevant to the story.

She seems intended as one form of survivor, a member of the shifting searching "youth" world, in contrast to Rill's station manager as a personification of the corrupt and controlling world of business. Yet these two glimpses of contemporary society seem naïve, trivial and too clichéd to contrast to the weighty implications of the visual-audial theme of electronic communication as a unifier of the solitary thoughts of man in a visibly magnificent universe.

Fortunately there is a great deal more to the film than the story. The exploration of sound and electronic communication and a sense of the power and possibility slumbering in the future, and the attempt to comprehend what space, world space, inner space, outer space, means to us, are ideal subjects for film. I wonder if Acoma has much more to say at this point, other than to note the phenomena and to excitingly communicate his awareness.

At any rate I am so thankful for a film with a good understanding of the use of sight and sound that it didn't bother me too much that the plot is a little thin, some characterizations rather too skimpy and the ending endless. Actually, I didn't care for the purify-by-fire or give-up-and-burn finale the DJ takes to his problems, but then I liked even less the epilogue to it, and less than that even, the epilogue to *that*. Though they had their points, and the final white-out was effective, they tended to be didactic, uninvolved and undramatic. Too much for the film. It's always hard to know when to stop, and in this case, obviously hard to know *how* to either. Maybe Acoma should have left Mike Mallard on his farm with his non-laying chickens, quietly starving to death in the Alberta foothills, sending out pure sounds into the pure air. •

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