

Carle's Heavenly Bodies



plus
some
other
works
and
sage
thoughts
by the
well
known
Quebec
director

There usually is a barrier between the director and the producer. With Gilles Carle, the barrier crumbles. Administrative problems are not unfamiliar to him and I am always extremely attentive to artistic demands. We have a great understanding on this level.

There are no insoluble problems for Gilles Carle. He is never stumped by problems. On the contrary, he knows how to use difficult situations to his advantage, thus amplifying the artistic value of his films.

On location, he is one of the best organized filmmakers I know. That is when he is happiest, and it is then that all his talents are displayed."

Pierre Lamy, Producer

Gilles Carle was born in Maniwaki, Quebec, in 1929. He studied at the École des Beaux-Arts de Montreal: commercial art with Henry Eveleigh and painting with Alfred Pellan. Did graphic art at Le Soleil de Québec, La Photogravure de Québec, and also at the CBC. Has written two fictional novels, thirty-six short stories, three plays. Founded Les Editions de l'Hexagone together with poet Gaston Miron and two friends, Olivier Marchand and Louis Portuguais. Has reviewed books, films and television programs and founded L'Ecran, a magazine of film reviews, with Patrick Straram and Jean Billard. Starting in 1960, he started directing short films, including *Percé on the Rocks* (1964) and *Le Québec à l'Heure de l'Expo* (1967). Concurrently, four hour-long television programs were directed by him, and in 1965 Gilles Carle made his first feature film, *La Vie Heureuse de Leopold Z*, winning a Grand Prix at the Canadian Film Festival of that year. *Le Viol d'une Jeune Fille Douce* (1968) afforded him the chance to discover the Pilon brothers, who continue to appear in every Carle feature. *Red* (1969), *Les Mâles* (1970), *La Vraie Nature de Bernadette* (1971), *La Mort d'un Bûcheron* (1972) and *Les Corps Célestes* (1973) followed, establishing Gilles Carle as perhaps the best known Quebec director on an international scale. His features have been shown in all of the major festivals and had commercial runs in Australia, Sweden, France, India, Mexico. Some of them even made it to Toronto.

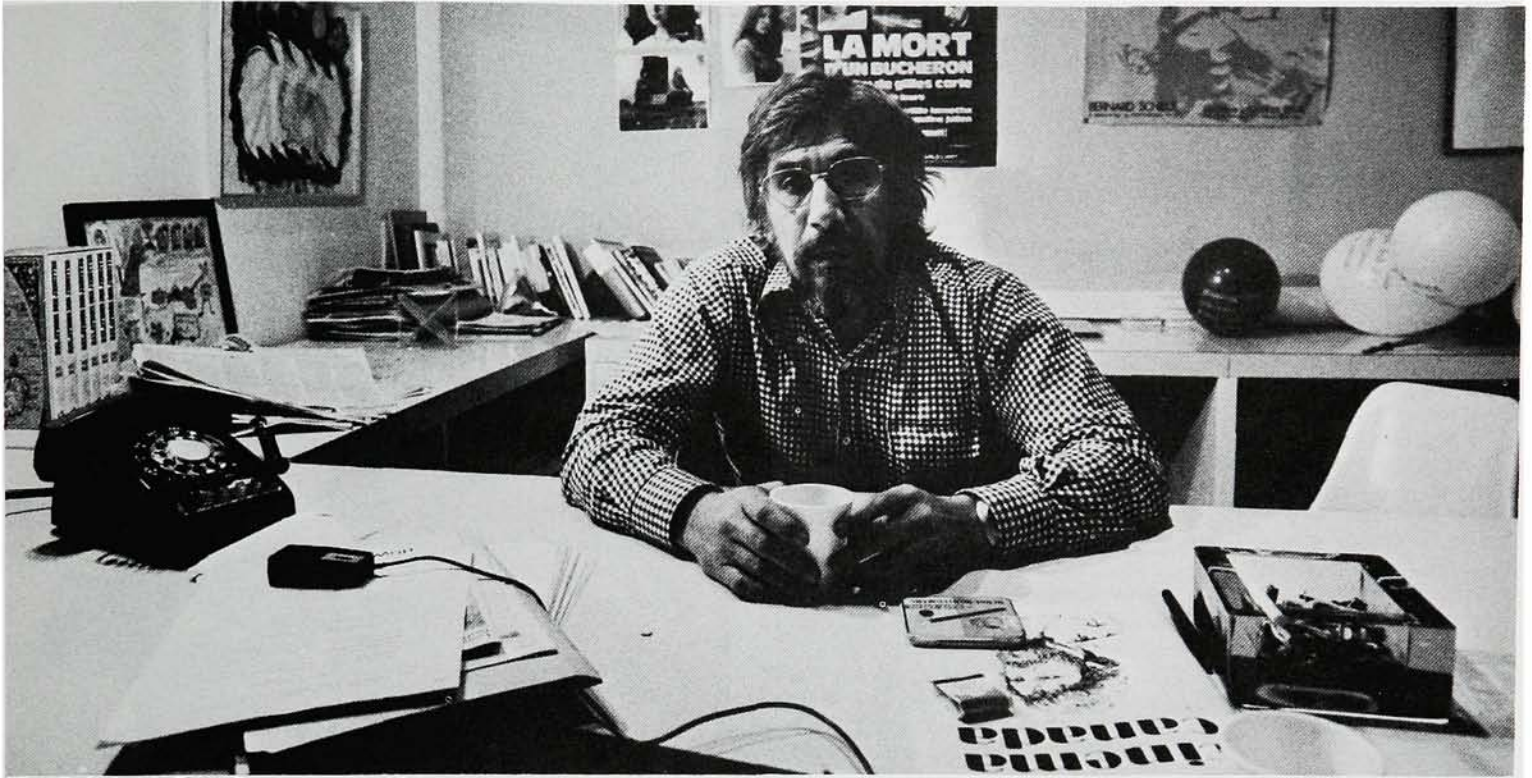
*How do you manage to maintain your integrity, your energy, your sanity in *Place Bonaventure*, in this kind of atmosphere?*

"Oh, it's terrible here. I think the reason I made **Bernadette** was because of the situation in here, in this bunker with no windows. That film was my wish to get out!"

But you still manage to go on creating . . .

"Well, it's funny, because I'm not a real filmmaker. I'm in film up to here, but at the same time I'm out of it. Cinema to me is not more important than anything else. So, I go at large in Québec, I'm at home everywhere, except here. I sort of manage to keep one foot in here and one foot outside, so I'm ready to run all the time (laughter). And I keep running, because . . . I don't want to make films with films, I want to make films with life. So the way I live is more important than my films. I never really had one single idea about one particular film. I don't ever have any film ideas. Just things I want to say, because my life happened to be in that way for so many months. So I've reached a conclusion, or some idea that I would like to express, you know, in a popular way, and that's why I make a film. Because I have no film ideas - I don't make murder stories, science fiction stories, or horror films. They're horrible to me. I just make a film.

"I did **Heavenly Bodies** because one day I was up North on this lake and I saw a man with his two kids carrying a Christmas tree, and that image was fascinating to me. Very fascinating. And I started remembering how, when I was nine, whores were coming by plane for the weekends. It was payday, but the miners would spend their money so fast that it wasn't worthwhile for them to stay fifteen days, so they would take the plane back to Montréal and come back in ten days. So I started thinking about all this, and thinking about war, and then the film came out, you know, about that euphoria I started to see everywhere. I started to see how people were avoiding their problems all the time, and I was avoiding them myself. I was cheating, I was just trying to make a nice office and not caring about poor people . . . you see life in a certain way and then you talk about it.



Gilles Carle in his Place Bonaventure office

But do you talk about it to teach, or simply because you have to talk about it?

“Just because I have to talk about it, because I like to talk about it. Because it’s my way of being. If I talk about it, I can – maybe – reach something else. So I’m really going for one film after another after another. And I’m always trying to reverse the situation from one film to another, not trying to make the same film. It’s not a coincidence that the **True Nature of Bernadette** was the first film I did while living at Place Bonaventure, which is the most artificial part of the city. Seeing all this and living here, I started to see the country in a different way. Fresh air, pollution, everything. So a question came to my mind, what’s natural and what’s artificial? Am I better in here with unpolluted air than outside with polluted air? What’s happening to the country? You don’t ask yourself this when you’re *in* the country, but you ask that question between white walls, like here, with no windows. So **Bernadette** is a reflection of all this, my life, but I don’t try to put my subjectivity into my films, do you know what I mean? I try to get rid of myself and be out of myself when I think of my film.

“I think there are too many problems in the world today. Every film is seen through the ‘problem-optic.’ If there’s a problem, you need a solution. I want to leave my subjectivity out and try to *look* at myself as one of the many people who are working.

“There’s one thing which Bob Dylan said about Lightning Hopkins which I like very much. He said, ‘he’s in his songs and out of his songs at the same time.’ I think this is maturity and this is what we have to reach. He talks in a very simple way, and it’s perfect and it’s global. You feel his wife is there in his songs and you feel all women at the same time. If you leave your wife out and talk about womanhood, it’s no good, you see? So Lightning Hopkins is in and he’s out of his songs. That’s what I like about the blues. It’s music I’m very close to. So I try to do this.

“At the same time I’ve reached a point where I believe that you must show the world as something which you can do

something about, something that can be changed. I finally got to thinking that some revolutionary films are not revolutionary at all, because they show the world as an unchanging and fixed structure. They don’t say don’t try to change it, but they never show what one can do about it. It’s important now that every film should try to say: you can change something about your own life, and at the same time, maybe change something about the world. So you must show the world as a changing structure, something that can be changed, something that can be transformed, that the world *can* be something else. That will be my next film, in a way. To try and say to people that you can do something about your own situation. To me, that’s the most important thing now. Films should deal more with ethics, than aesthetics.

“You don’t have to say it in an intellectual way, because if you just make a slogan out of it, it’s nothing. You must show how it can be done in real life. If it’s just another slogan, you’re in competition with corn flakes and coca-cola. You must be deeper than this and show how life is constructed not out of models but in trying to reach something. How it can change, how it can be transformed. So I’m trying to get characters together for my next film. It starts with a woman, and she decides that she has nothing to do and so she will stay in bed. She won’t get up out of that bed for forty-five or fifty minutes. Then once she gets up, it will be like the world is passing through her, rotating once again. I’m trying to get the new feeling of being born again. Going back to being an animal and being reborn as a human being, and what it involves. That’s what I’m working on right now, because I would like to do it myself, you know.

“But I’m worried, because the industry in Canada is reaching and striving all the time to make films which are just films, and to me making a film that is just a film is no excuse for having an industry. So let’s consider all that we have already done as shit, and start all over again. Even **The Heavenly Bodies**. Yeah, you must scrap your own film, and say: I tried to make this, and I tried to say that and it’s no good, so I’ll try again. It’s hard to be free and do really the film which you would like to do.”

What didn't work for you in *La Mort d'un Bûcheron* (*Death of a Lumberjack*)?

"It didn't reach deep enough. Also, I should have worked on that film's structure for quite a while, and I didn't. I just made the film with the characters, and left the structure to nothing."

That's the title of your next film, *Rien or Nothing*?

"Nothing. It's an English title. Maybe the critics will say it's worth nothing. I have to leave the door open for a little humor." (laughter).

How did the critics receive your films in Europe?

"There was a lot of controversy about *Lumberjack*. Some thought it was a sex film. Others thought it was a family portrait."

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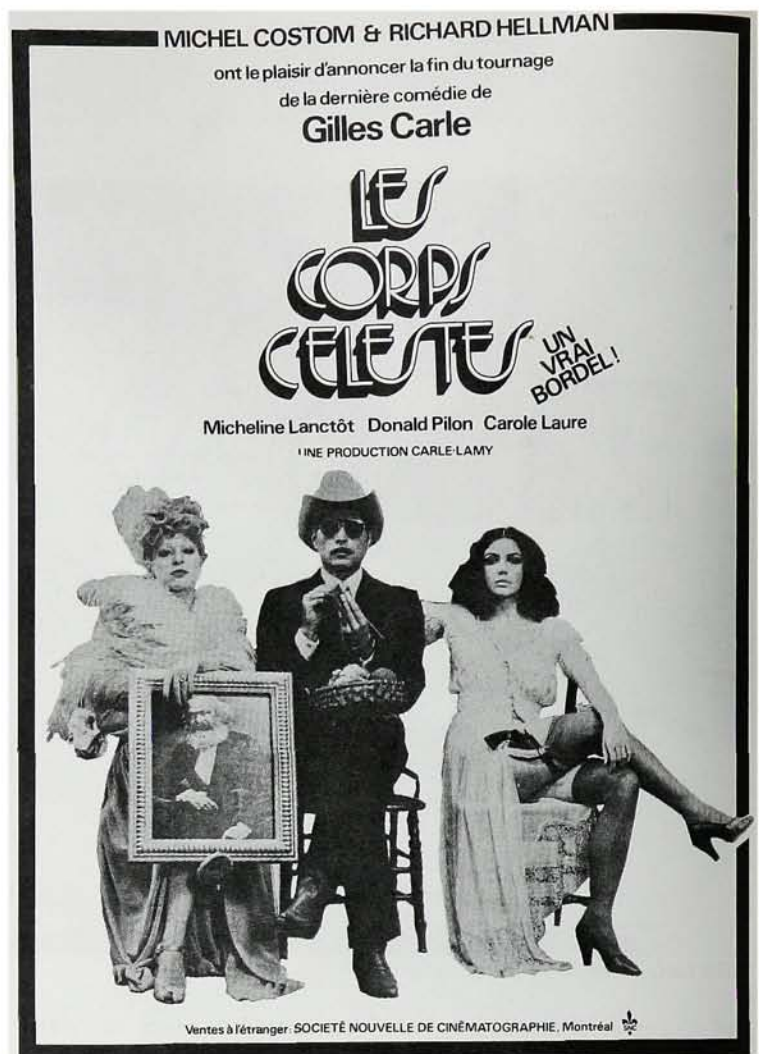
Les Corps Célestes (*The Heavenly Bodies*), a film by Gilles Carle. Original idea, screenplay by Gilles Carle, with the collaboration of Arthur Lamothe. Produced by Pierre Lamy. Director of Photography, Jean Claude Labrecque. Art director: Jocelyn Joly. Sound recordist: Henri Blondeau. Mixer: Alex Front. Music: Philippe Sarde. Production Manager: Louise Ranger. Stills: Bruno Massenet. Starring Micheline Lanctôt as Sweetie, Carole Laure as Rose-Marie, and Donald Pilon as Desmond. Shot in the Abitibi region between March 12 and May 2, 1973, in 35mm Eastmancolor, using the Panavision process. Laboratory: Quebec Film Labs. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. With the participation of Grimco, the CFDC, and Quebec Film Labs, a Canada-France co-production by Les Productions Carle-Lamy and Mojack Films of Montreal, and Parc Film, NEF Diffusion of Paris.

Carle's *Les Corps Célestes* (*The Heavenly Bodies*) opened in Montreal in four theatres, plus about eleven others throughout Quebec, on the 21st of September, 1973. It ran for four, five or six weeks, depending on the location, and failed to rack up impressive grosses. "It laid a great big ostrich egg" was the way money man Richard Hellman, the film's co-producer and distributor, put it. The critics gave it a mixed reaction, and no further distribution is planned within the foreseeable future.

Initially, Carle wanted to shoot this film in both English and French, but the CFDC vetoed the idea. Done bi-lingually, *The Heavenly Bodies* could have become the first Quebec film to cross that "intellectual and psychological border which exists between Montreal and Toronto," according to the director. As it is, it would probably have to be a success in New York or Paris, before English Canadian distribution is assured. Gilles Carle is very much aware of this and seems resigned to it as a fact of life.

Regardless of its box-office performance, the film should definitely be shown all over Canada. Judging from Carle's description, it is a fascinating study in contradictions of a group of people totally unaware of impending doom, lost in a fragile euphoria, undisturbed by obvious warning signs that World War II is at hand. *Les Corps Célestes* takes place in 1938 and concerns the setting up of a brothel in northern Ontario, near the Quebec border. More precisely in Kirkland Lake, just up the road from Swastika, Ont. Perhaps another bittersweet Carle touch.

"Maybe one day," explained the director with a fast-greying beard, "people will say it's fun to see a Canadian film. It hasn't happened yet. If I had an English version, perhaps my film could have been the first. It deals as much with Ontario as with Quebec. It takes place in Kirkland Lake, which I renamed, rebaptised Borntown, in 1938. It deals with the discovery of the mines, the brothel with one Jewish girl, one girl from Vancouver, one girl from Toronto, one a Catholic, one a Protestant. And the Madame, who is French Canadian, played



DISTRIBUTION CINE-ART

by Micheline Lanctôt. Donald Pilon is Desmond, you never know exactly where he comes from. Carole Laure, of course, and you have this melting pot on the border of Quebec and Ontario, with mixed up people, a Polish girl, miners, and all.

"*Les Corps Célestes* doesn't deal with Québec culture the same way *Death of a Lumberjack* deals with Québec culture. This film is about war. It takes place in 1938, the last three weeks of the year, and nobody believes that war will come. The only people who think that war will come are the ones who want to profit from it. It shows War not as Power but as Impotence. It shows war as a lack of virility. You make war because you're scared, because you're a coward. The film is also about euphoria, people wanting to create paradise all the time. It's a pessimistic view of happiness.

"The story had to take place in 1938," continued Carle with powerful eyes burning behind his tinted glasses, "not a year before or after. It had to be at this very precise point after the Munich agreement, Chamberlain saying 'Peace in our time,' and the Pope saying that 'the year 1939 will be the first real year of peace on earth.' And people know it wasn't that way. You even hear Hitler in German saying that he won't ever make war, and at the end of the film you hear Kennedy saying 'We won't go to Vietnam'.

"That's the film. It's in a brothel, but there is no sex in it. War is always in the background like a thunder far away, a far away thunder that people hear but no one cares about. The storm that will come. Everybody's trying to get thicker carpets, nicer papered walls, and a nicer girl, and a nicer that, and a nicer this, so they care about the little things, but they don't care about the big ones. That's what the motto for the film should be . . . and it's a comedy. It's supposed to be funny.



The seven cosmic whores with Desmond (Donald Pilon)

"I always make dramas that make people laugh, so I hope that this one still makes people laugh . . .

"I shot it so that there are no conflicts, only phony conflicts. I took all the subjects of the time, you know, virginity, poverty, all that was in people's minds at the time and made small conflicts, which are really nothing, and all through the film you hear the radio you hear Hitler, but you shut the radio off. The film itself is a conflict with reality, but in the film there are no real conflicts. That's why I called it the 'heavenly bodies.' It's seven whores, like the cosmos, and Desmond is like a son. It's heaven: they're trying to create Paradise, but it's an artificial paradise.

"Even the brothel has social classes, you know. One room which is very, very bourgeois, for the managers of the mine. It's very, very chic and they call it the Pompadour Room. For the workers they have a Socialist's Paradise. Then they have an Exotic Paradise in another, and altogether you have five rooms like this which are taking care of the mentality of the people around and the different social classes. Everybody is creating the right, the perfect, the all love atmosphere all the time. But still, war is coming. I was in Borntown in 1938 when I was 8 or 9, so this was very close to me. I didn't want to get out of myself; I started from my point of view.

"I never show actual war. I show war the only way I've seen it, only the radio voices, the heavenly voices, which are pouring down on the poor people, and saying dat and dat and dat, all the time. I didn't use stock shots or pictures of Chamberlain or Churchill. War is only on the sound track all the time, and the sound track is in direct contradiction with the paradise image.

"The brothel never actually opens during the film. Only at the end comes the first customer . . . And the first customer is War."

* * *

*Most of your recent films are certainly multi-levelled and could be viewed as allegories about Quebec and her people. The ending of *La Mort d'un Bûcheron*, for instance, must certainly contain a message for the Québécois.*

"The message, if there is a message, is very simple. It is easy to put a bomb in a letter box, but it's hard to go into a village and work for five years. One I call *love*, the other . . . premature ejaculation. We have to get rid of premature ejaculation, and reach love one day.

"I don't know if it is being achieved or not. To fight hard with a sudden blow for a few seconds in order to try and change a whole situation which has been there for two hundred years, to me that's no good. I'm trying to say that you must really be prepared for work and study, and try to know what's really happening, and try to reach ways to bring about changes that reach deep into what we are.

"It's like mistaking Cuba and Québec. I don't believe in models. I don't think the French should buy the American model, for instance. I'm a separatist but I'm not a nationalist. I'm trying to say all the time what's good and what's different. Because I want for Québec to be entirely different. I want Ontario to be different. I would like Canada to be five countries. I hate big countries. I hate super dreams. I hate empires. I like small communities, where people can develop in a different way.



Donald Pilon, Carole Laure, Micheline Lanctôt and Gilles Carle at the opening

“What would the world gain if English Canada would become American? It would just make the United States bigger. It would be better if the United States were smaller, say twenty countries. Tribal wars are better than world wars. I’m not a sociologist or a philosopher, I’m just trying to put out my natural emotion for things, that’s all I can do. I don’t have all the knowledge I should have, I haven’t read all the books I

should have read. But I still have a belief, which is that the world would be better if nobody would develop super dreams and super structures to impose on people . . . through repression. I believe that you should get rid of super empires, super stars, super everything, and come back to a sort of normality. Come back to small communities, which are linked by culture, by language, by emotions, by a way of looking at life, by religion, by things like this.

“People say that I have no religion, but I really have twenty-five – I believe in them all. It’s true, I believe in them all, and super dreams make retarded nations, like super intelligent parents make retarded children. I would like to go back to normalcy and extend it, so that it could reach both ways. Instead of reducing normalcy all the time and making everybody abnormal, you know. We’re a retarded country, because of what’s happening in the world today, but we should just be a plain country developing its own culture. And I don’t think North America would gain anything by suppressing French Canada or making English Canada American. When I go to Toronto I look at television for hours and I come out of it very angry, because they look at Canada in a dream sort of way, it’s just a big dream. They’re looking for Canada and it’s a philosophy which underlies everything. It’s a nice attitude, you know, nice unity, love of everybody and everything, but through a sort of banality of suppressing differences, which I hate. They love the world, but they don’t love their neighbor. That’s the problem.

“Like the National Film Board – it’s a dream. You can make a film about revolution at the National Film Board any time . . . if it doesn’t communicate, and merely talks about revolution *in the world*. But as soon as you bring the revolution back to your own family, your own country, and see revolution in Montreal on the street, oh boy, then you’re in trouble!

“The Canadian dream is an awful thing. It gets me very angry. Someday I’ll certainly make a film about this. It’s reducing life through general attitudes. I’d like to return to the village, to the small country, to your own culture, and develop in it and see what comes out of it. You must love humanity. So I’m against all models: ‘This is the American model, this is the French Canadian’ . . . who says so? The American model is not even good for Texans. It’s not even good for San Francisco, because people are against it now. And I’m all for that . . .”

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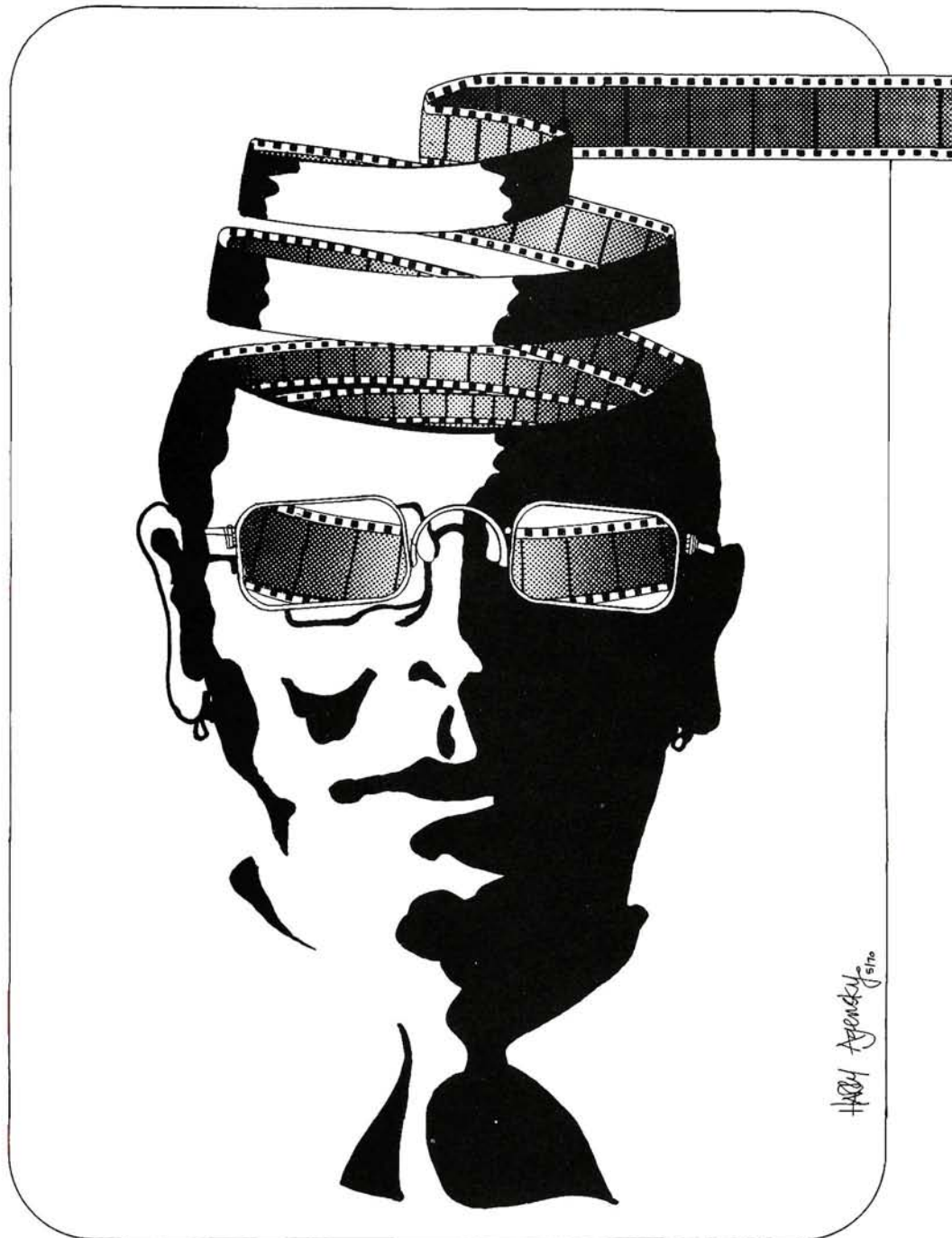


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