

# FILM REVIEW

Written and directed by Gilles Carle. Director of photography: René Verzier. Artistic Director: Jocelyn Joly. Sound: Henri Blondeau. Mix: Austin Grimaldi and William O'Neill. Music: Pierre F. Brault. Produced by Les Productions Carle-Lamy Ltée with the assistance of the Canadian Film Development Corporation and Compagnie France Film. With Micheline Lanctôt, Donald Pilon, Reynald Bouchard, Maurice Beaupré.

Four images glide by — framed drawings of a carrot, a beet, a cucumber and a tomato — and we have entered the world of Bernadette Brown, city wife and mother, soon to become Bernadette Bonheur, country free-spirit extraordinaire, and the fascinating, tempestuous, irresistible and ultimately disturbing heroine of *La Vraie Nature de Bernadette*.

We have also entered the world of Gilles Carle, a fine Québécois film-maker and one of Canada's most outstanding film artists; a man of extraordinary wit and imagination with the ability to employ every aspect of the film medium to advantage in expressing his unique vision of Québec, and thence of the world.

Although Carle disclaims any intention of sustaining a sense of continuity from one film to the next, *La Vraie Nature de Bernadette* is the recognisably close relative of his previous films, particularly *Le Viol d'une Jeune Fille Douce* (1968) and *Les Mâles* (1970).

*Le Viol d'une Jeune Fille Douce*, Carle's second feature (*La Vie Heureuse de Léopold Z* had preceded it in 1965), focused a more widespread national and international attention on Gilles Carle's abilities. Some critics were disturbed by Carle's strong Godardian tendencies: the apparent random selection and juxtaposition of individual images and sequences; the insistence on maintaining a distance between the viewer and the film's characters by obscuring or omitting a character's motivations. The film suffered from a resultant tendency to fragment — one remembered individual scenes and sequences, such as the rape, or Susan's suicide, rather than a cohesive whole. Nevertheless, it was an exciting work with an undeniable energy, an inventive satiric wit and a fine humanistic sensibility, weaving their merry threads throughout the fabric of the film.

Evident also was Carle's fascination with the individual in society and how he or she copes with the demands and pressures of that society. This is a key theme in Carle's work; a theme he ex-

plored further in *Red* (1969) and in Bernadette's closest relative, *Les Mâles*.

With *Les Mâles*, the Godardian influences had weakened and given way to Carlian humanism, energy, inventiveness and wit. The story was more linear, and the images (such as the mammary totem-pole carvings and the ruined or "deflowered" wedding cake) were more directly related to the film's mood and theme rather than to a desire to distance the viewer. The main characters, Emile and St. Pierre, were complex, human and accessible, unlike the distant, unidimensional abstractions of *Le Viol d'une Jeune Fille Douce*.

But most important, *Les Mâles* revealed the emergence of a structural and philosophical approach that would see its fullest realization in *La Vraie Nature de Bernadette* and marked the introduction of a character — a young city girl seeking an idealized natural life in the wilds of Quebec — who would prove to be the fore-runner or "blueprint," if you will, of the woman who emerges in all her glorious ambiguity and complexity as the heroine of *La Vraie Nature de Bernadette*.

*Bernadette*, Carle's fifth and finest film to date, is the most detailed and carefully realized expression of this the individual's survival in modern society. It is a haunting analysis of the nature of impractical idealism and the dangers inherent in employing idealism as a means of escaping reality rather than as a means of tempering one's adaptation to life's ultimately inescapable realities. His characters are vigorous, multi-dimensional human beings with their contradictory actions and desires, whose motivations are realistically blurred and complex.

Humanism has triumphed over cool detachment, and a strong original style and structure have fully asserted themselves. Carle has constructed an intelligent and sensitive film predicated on a skilfully sustained balance of the comic with the tragic. Concurrent with the development of the film's comic-satiric narrative, Carle develops a sobering undercurrent of tragic intimations — a controlled undercurrent whose disturbed waters ultimately explode through the film's glossy and deceptively light-hearted surface as violent tragedy becomes an ideal-shattering reality.

The script (written by Carle) explores the complexities and contradictions of

human nature and of civilized social existence instead of simply presenting them in a superficial fabrication of reality. A remarkably intricate script, it provides Carle with a carefully woven framework within which he is free to unfold his exploration of idealism and realism, two approaches to the single problem of survival in today's society, and develop them in terms of the relationship between two human beings thus avoiding the dangers of lifeless, ideological abstraction.

By drawing us into the lives of Bernadette, the impractical idealist from the city (portrayed by Micheline Lanctôt), and Thomas, her practical, realistic country neighbour (portrayed by Donald Pilon) Carle conveys his philosophical views in very human terms, thus decreasing the distance between his characters and his audience, yet greatly increasing the film's emotional and intellectual impact.

Bernadette, no longer able to tolerate the pressures of life in the crowded, polluted and materialistic city environment, decides that her salvation — indeed the salvation of all people living in society! — must lie in a return to the basic values of a life in nature. Bernadette, aware that such a natural existence is impossible in the city, makes the assumption that it must be attainable in the country.

She packs her suitcase, hangs her apartment keys on the kitchen tap (a precise and vivid image signifying the end of her life as a city apartment dweller), places her wedding ring on a plate with a half-eaten cake (another marvelously incisive image symbolic of her renunciation of conventional marriage) and heads for her country salvation with son Yanick (Yves Thérien) in tow.

A wonderfully bouncy Québécois folk tune (composed by Pierre Brault, as was the rest of the film's evocative score) begins as Bernadette guides her light blue convertible off the paved highway and rattles down a dirt road towards her country destination. But what's this? Some rural character has parked his tractor across the road in front of her, temporarily preventing the completion of her flight to "freedom"! The joyous music ends abruptly as Bernadette's car pulls to a halt. Before her, perched on his tractor, Thomas Carufel is engaged in a one-man strike against the government for its interference in his farming concerns.



# La Vraie Nature de Bernadette

Thomas' rebellious action is just the first of many sobering intrusions of reality, and Bernadette's reaction is the first of her ultimately fatal refusals to see the profound implications of each intrusion. Bernadette fails to recognize his protest as a symbol of the omnipresence of society's influence and tangible evidence of the essential flaw in her philosophy of survival. Instead, she interprets it as proof of Thomas' failure as a true country dweller and sets out to "enlighten" Thomas, to make him conform to her romantic image of the happy care-free rustic and stand as living proof of the viability of her philosophy.

Like a religious missionary sent to a land officially designated as "heathen," Bernadette preaches her back-to-nature gospels on the powers of pure love, simply presuming that everyone needs these doctrines in order to live a full life. In her "religious" zeal she is unaware that her "converts" — the crippled youth,

eager pupils while actually using her as they would one of society's more ancient institutions, the whore. Saint and whore; dream and reality: just one possible interpretation of just one of the many levels on which Carle succeeds in expressing, with satire and tragedy, the intricacies of his single theme.

Bernadette's relationship with Thomas contrasts greatly with her relationships with the other characters. Although he too sees through her illusions, he neither exploits her nor sloughs her off as a light-headed fool. He is honestly concerned that she break through her protective armour of self-deception before reality breaks through and crushes her.

At first their relationship is fiery and funny, punctuated by several comic confrontations — witty, brief but precise distillations of the film's essential conflict between dream and reality. One example: Bernadette's high-minded condemnation of Thomas for using an automatic washing machine instead of washing his clothes in the pure, natural waters of a country brook; and Thomas' calm, factual reply, "Bernadette, there is no brook."

As Bernadette's blindness leads to several progressively significant tragedies, Thomas' initial amusement and fascination evolve into restrained anxiety. When Bernadette's belated awareness begins to emerge, she panics and wants to run away again. But Thomas is there to stop her with his firm but tender warning: "Bernadette! You can't run forever."

Carle's slow build towards the final devastating onslaught of realities is masterful. Light-hearted humour turns progressively more sour as deaths — related directly or indirectly to Bernadette's misguided philosophies — begin to mount. Early in the film Bernadette's "liberated" chickens die as result of their new-found freedom; then Thomas' aging horse is mercifully put to death in spite of Bernadette's attempts to save it from the inevitable; and a pig that Bernadette had saved from slaughter is ultimately killed by a truck from the city. But eventually these relatively minor yet meaningful incidents are climaxed by the tragic deaths of two people whom Bernadette had attempted to free, like the unfortunate farm animals, from the inevitable realities of their existences.

Her illusions so forcibly ripped from her, Bernadette takes a rifle and fires wildly into a crowd of Catholic "pil-

grims" who had come to see the new "Saint Bernadette" (and who loot her home under the pretext of gathering "religious relics"! ) Bernadette's action is a last desperate attempt to expel society's realities. The death throes of obsessive idealism are terrifying indeed. When the smoke clears and the pilgrims have scattered unharmed, the realities are still there; the deaths have still occurred.

In the film's final moments we see Thomas driving his tractor through a light snowfall with a silent impassive Bernadette at his side. Her "followers" have abandoned her in the face of reality, but Thomas Carufel is still there. He is there to help her survive the tragic results of her blindness; he is there to help her face life as it is and not as it should be.

From the comic repartees at the beginning through to the tragic drama at the end, Micheline Lanctôt and Donald Pilon, singly or as a duo, are totally convincing as Bernadette and Thomas; their beautiful performances are restrained, sensitive and marvelously detailed.

Carle and his director of photography, René Verzier, reveal a remarkable ability to distill the essence of a mood or idea in a single shot, each shot remaining on the screen just long enough to intimate the presence of a deeper meaning beneath a deceptively flippant and casual surface simplicity. An example is the very brief shot of Thomas' large white horse lying dead on the green grass of an open field as Thomas digs a gigantic grave. A brief but inexorably melancholy image — a foreshadowing of the film's climactic denouement: the death of Bernadette's idealism.

**La Vraie Nature de Bernadette** succeeds as a film because Gilles Carle integrates its many and varied components, both visual and thematic, into a unified but complex whole. Nothing is extraneous — each image, scene, sequence, colour, sound, word, facial expression, body movement, bar of music — has its justification, its small but significant role to play in developing and sustaining the film's unifying mood and theme.

**La Vraie Nature de Bernadette** is a rarity: a delightful entertainment and at the same time a profoundly moving social document. A rich and haunting work by an important and gifted director.

— Laurinda Hartt



Micheline Lanctôt and Gilles Carle

Rock (Reynald Bouchard); the elderly Octave (Maurice Beaupré) and his friends Moise (Ernest Guimond) and Auguste (Julien Lippe); and the sinister late-comers, St-Marc (Yves Allaire) and St-Luc (Yvon Barrette) — only pretend to conform to her impractical doctrines for the practical purpose of benefiting from her liberal ministrings of "pure love".

For a brief moment all *seems* peaceful: Bernadette is content in her illusion that she and her "followers" are free from the corrupting influences of society; and her "followers" are happy with the arrangement — playing the roles of