

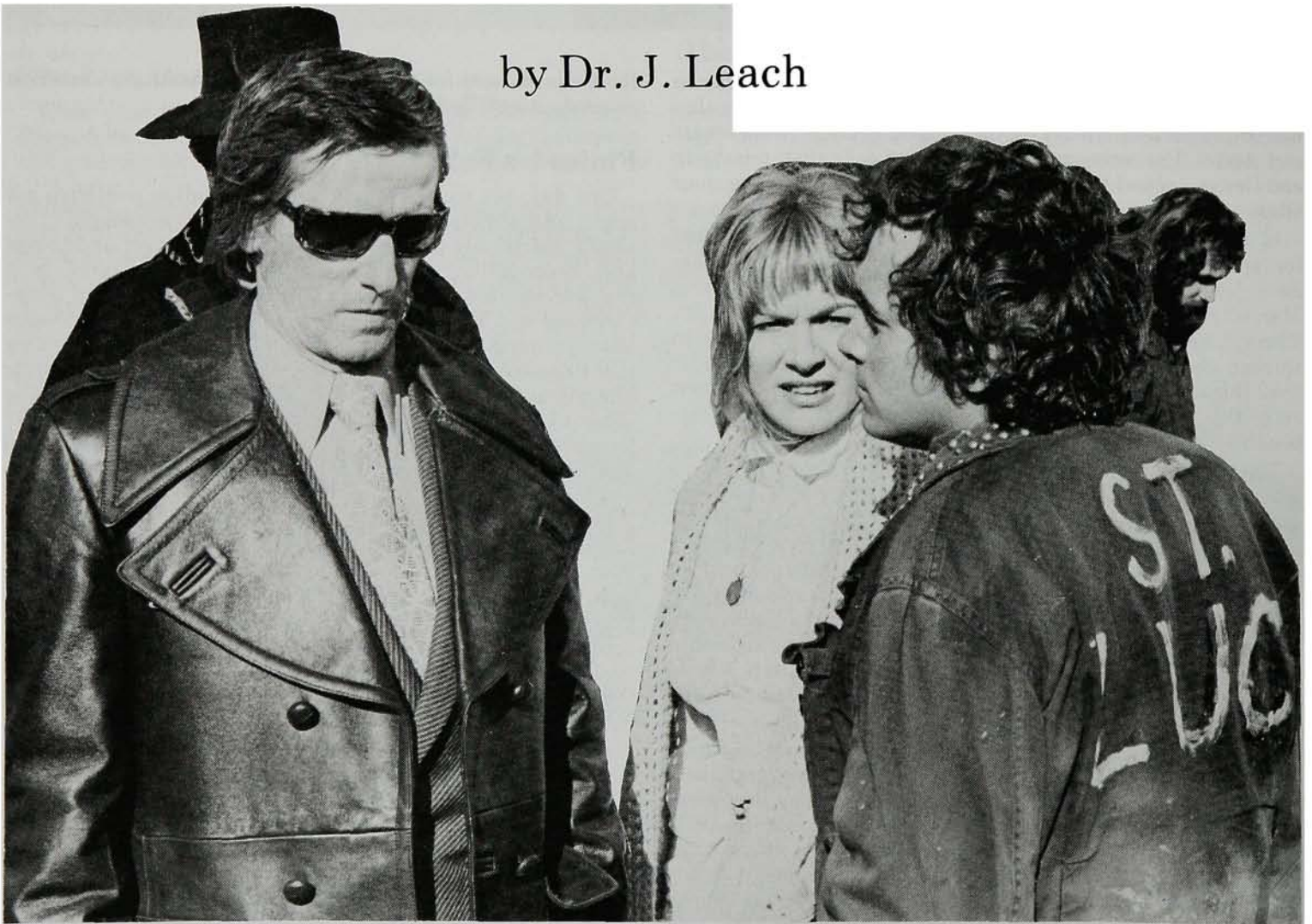
# the sins of gilles carle

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One of Quebec's most prolific and commercially oriented filmmakers is Gilles Carle. He has maintained a high standard of filmmaking, and has received a lot of critical attention. After the thematic study of his works which *Cinema Canada* published last year, here is a more probing look at the filmmaker, his philosophy of filmmaking, and the reaction of the critics. Gilles Carle, take two.

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by Dr. J. Leach

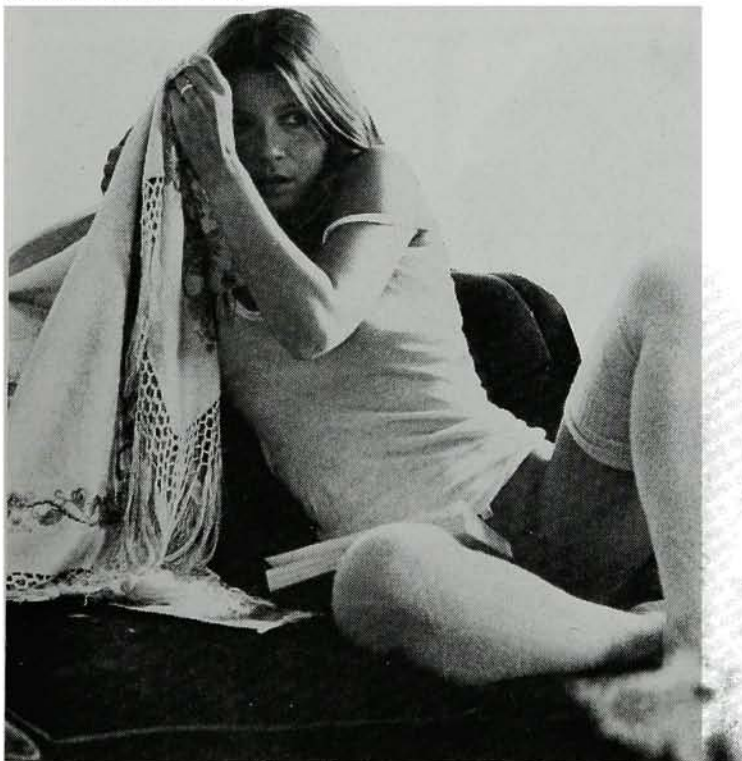


The start of a fight as Bernadette (Micheline Lanctot) looks on in *La vraie nature de Bernadette*

Despite their popularity in Quebec and France, the films of Gilles Carle have rarely pleased the critics. In fact, with a few notable exceptions, there has been a disturbing unanimity of response among liberal Anglo-Saxon and radical Québécois critics. There are, of course, differences of emphasis but the "sins" of Gilles Carle can be conveniently collected under three main headings: 1) a diffuseness and carelessness of structure that causes sudden shifts in tone and leaves many loose ends; 2) exploitation of his actors and audience, especially the females among both; and 3) pessimistic endings expressive only of frustration and entrapment.

Before Carle is condemned to perdition, however, some examination of the critical assumptions on which these judgments are based might be in order. The ideal film that they imply would be based on a principle of restraint and economy of means, would be socially and politically engaged, and would avoid undue manipulation of the audience while nevertheless offering a positive (but not too obtrusive) resolution of its tensions. Many fine films have been made according to this recipe but it rests on a limited attitude to the film experience which treats a film as a self-contained product rather than as an event. Carle's films are a direct assault on this attitude and an attempt to open up film form to cope with the contradictions that he sees around him, contradictions which are rooted in the specific reality of Quebec but which have a wide resonance.

In challenging the conventional attitudes to film form, Carle is inevitably challenging the methods of conventional film criticism – and film criticism, as is its wont, has not yet met the challenge. Piers Handling's analysis of Carle's "themes", for example, offers valuable insights into the iconography of his work but does little to elucidate the originality of Carle's treatment of fairly commonplace motifs.<sup>1</sup> A more promising approach is suggested by Jean-Pierre Tadros in his treatment of *La tête de Normande St-Onge* (1975) as a "game of seduction", an idea to which I will return later.<sup>2</sup> In the absence of a critical theory that can take Carle fully into account, I have tried merely to outline his approach (using his own words wherever possible) and to suggest the ways in which this approach sets up a relationship with the audience that is both complex and stimulating.



Carole Laure as Normande: on her way to stardom?

Pierre Demers has described Carle's work as an attempt to escape into the past and into rural Quebec, away from the problems of modern urban reality.<sup>3</sup> A movement from city to country is certainly a feature of many of Carle's films and it is often associated with an exploration of the past. Marie Chapdelaine searches for her father in *La mort d'un bûcheron* (1972), while a halfbreed tries to renounce the white side of his nature in *Red* (1969). But in both cases the return to the past is shown to be a delusion and the characters have to come to terms with their present reality: Marie's father has died in a labor dispute that bears directly on Quebec's present state and Red finds that the Indian way of life has become riddled with contradictions as a result of its contact with "civilization". Carle's treatment of nature, too, is far from the naivety of Rousseauism: in *La vraie nature de Bernadette* (1971) the city woman finds that her ideal of a pastoral life does not take into account either the brutal side of nature or the mechanization of modern farming. Similarly, the retreat into the wilderness of St-Pierre and St-Marie in *Les mâles* (1970) does not resolve the contradictions of their lives and they end up stranded in the urban desolation of Montreal.

Carle's memories of his own past in northern Quebec do, however, provide the basis for his vision of Quebec as a locus of contradictions:

Our radio picked up Buffalo and Montreal, always together, never separate, so that the religious broadcasts always had a pleasant background of country and western music... We seven children would thus recite our rosaries at a gallop, learning that in Quebec the most contradictory dreams are possible.<sup>4</sup>

This recollection of childhood is not a retreat from modern reality but part of his attempt to give that reality a mythic dimension and to link everyday reality with the "great realities". His first feature, *La vie heureuse de Léopold Z* (1965), originated as a documentary on snow removal and it still contains "documentary" sequences detailing the drabness of Léopold's existence and the procedures of his job. Yet Léo is quickly drawn into a three-way conflict, present in all Carle's films, between a materialistic reality (the loan office where even the pen is chained to the table), the false myths which society uses to prevent him from rebelling against this reality (Christmas as a time for family and church), and the impotent dreams through which he tries to escape from social pressures (Josita the nightclub singer, Florida or the Caribbean on credit). The audience is confronted with images that embody these tensions: as Léo is torn between hearing his son sing at midnight mass or Josita sing at the nightclub, we see his snowplow battling the storm to the accompaniment of the warm rhythms of Caribbean music.

Such unexpected juxtapositions form the basis of Carle's style and force the audience to work on its response to the film. His constant search for contradictions has led Gerald Pratley to object that Carle "doesn't give himself enough time to work out or properly motivate his screenplays, resulting in slap-dash ideas and incidents, superficiality, melodrama and ultimately confusion".<sup>5</sup> Nat Shuster similarly complains that in *La mort d'un bûcheron*, Carle "isn't just satisfied with telling a story" but "rides off into umpteen directions, skipping and jumping".<sup>6</sup> But these unsettling dislocations are calculated and derive from his rejection of "films that seem profound because they deal with only one reality" and his willingness to run the risk of "appearing superficial" by presenting his vision in "a

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*James Leach holds a Ph.D. from Birmingham University in England and teaches film and drama at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. He is presently writing on Canadian film in hopes of publishing a book on the subject.*

structure necessarily complex and diffuse". The proliferation of elements exposes the poverty of the official myths and the escapist fantasies. The three brothers in *Le viol d'une jeune fille douce* (1968) are named after the archangels Joachim, Gabriel, and Raphael, and they (as Carle puts it) "mythify themselves" while remaining oblivious to the contradiction between the myth and their reality as gangsters and rapists. *Bernadette* is built around the gulf between the banal and the religious in modern life, while *A Thousand Moons* (1975) contrasts the poverty of TV images, which the old Indian woman calls the white man's dreams, with the richness of the Indian myths that are slowly being forgotten.

Given the contradictory nature of their environment, Carle's characters cannot be the complete and fully rounded individuals of the "psychological" cinema that he, like many others, rejects. There is no such thing as a "true nature" in Carle, since character embodies the contradictions of society, and personality is not fixed but dynamic and fluid. The relationship of Carle to the theatre of the absurd is nowhere more apparent than in his assertion that "Only impossible characters are possible today." Julie, in *Le viol*, invites our sympathy as the victim of her brothers' aggression but we also have to watch her sit calmly by as they rape the hitchhiker. Bernadette, as Carle describes her, is "simultaneously a saint and a prostitute, a generous woman and an egoist". The spectator is confronted with characters who are "simultaneously antipathetic, sympathetic, violent, gentle, evil" and is thus prevented from achieving a secure relationship with the "world" on the screen.

The single perspective of conventional drama and film disappears and Carle sets out to view the "drama" of life "in as many of its facets as possible." Despite the multiplicity of subjects and viewpoints, however, the element of drama is not eliminated from Carle's work: "Since I examine life and since life is dramatic, drama arises naturally from the film." The result is that Carle's films can contain strong dramatic, even melodramatic, conflicts without betraying the complexity and contradictions that he finds in life.

This refusal to adopt, or allow the audience to adopt, a single, fixed viewpoint derives from Carle's rejection of all dogma:

I do not accept any orthodoxy, whether political, sociological or economic. Generally, man is compartmentalized, divided, reduced to a series of diverse values, and among these values some are privileged as being more noble... whereas what is necessary is a global vision of things and of people.

For Carle, dogma and orthodoxy represent the false myths which society imposes on the individual from above in order to perpetuate the established order. This idea is most clearly expressed in *Les corps célestes* (1973) which Carle describes as "a satire on ideologies". The "heavenly bodies" are both the physical attributes of the prostitutes who distract the miners from the dark reality of their subterranean existences and the religious and political myths that come from the skies (via radio antennae). Since the film is set in 1938, the voice of Hitler dominates the airways but the ending transcends time as we hear the voices of Kennedy, Nixon, and Trudeau.

Carle insists on the parallel between hierarchies in society and those in conventional cinema. He tries to avoid setting up structures which impose a viewpoint on the audience and instead opens up the medium by treating it as "a series of elements in which all are important". Most films tend to privilege either the dialogue or the image and the other elements merely support the chosen one, but Carle sabotages this approach either by presenting contradictions within the image or between the image and the soundtrack. *Les corps célestes*, for example, opens with a shot of a radio antenna and a union jack while the voice of Hitler is heard on the soundtrack, and the film is built out of the contrast between the menacing broadcasts and the sexual escapades depicted in the images. The dialectic set up here can be compared to that at the end of *Normande St-Onge* when images of Normande in a state of inertia are juxtaposed with images of her fantasies of sexual dominance, a dialectic that is not resolved by the final image of the old lady ungratefully stating that Normande never cared for her. In *Léopold Z* and *Bernadette* the cheerful music, Caribbean and country respectively, creates an uneasy light-heartedness in view of the frustration expressed in the images; the letters read on the soundtrack of *La mort d'un bûcheron* provide a contemplative counterpoint to the urgency and confusion shown in the images.



Donald Pilon and Carole Laure get acquainted in *Les corps célestes*

Just as Carle's approach to film form reflects his open approach to reality, so his objection to the compartmentalization of humanity is reflected in his rejection of the established genres which compartmentalize cinema. He sets out to mix up genres in the most startling ways, juxtaposes the comic and the serious, and claims that all his films contain elements of the love film and the *policier*. The genre of the western no longer corresponds to reality but some of the assumptions of the genre can still be found (anachronistically) in reality. Since Carle "takes reality into account", his films take on the qualities of the genre which shapes (and limits) the reality with which he is concerned. Thus **Le viol** becomes a modern version of the revenge western with the arrival of the brothers to defend their sister's honor; the entry of the police in **Les mâles** and **Normande St-Onge** turns these films briefly into *policiers* (comic in the first case); **Red** intermittently becomes a gangster film, developing the genre's essential parallel between gangsterism and capitalism; while **La mort d'un bûcheron** begins as an erotic film (a debased, modern version of *Marie Chapdelaine*) but ends as a political film as Marie moves from naive victim to an awareness of the historical forces shaping her society.

The movement from being exploited to becoming aware is basic to all of Carle's films, often for the characters but always for the audience. Yet this movement is often obscured, for those conditioned to the idea of film as mirror or as dream, by Carle's apparent playfulness. Carle himself has admitted that he has "always liked to play with names" but such games are not merely self-indulgent. The names of his characters connect them with the contradictions and myths of their society: Léopold Z thus has the universality and lack of specific identity of Kafka's K but his initial also makes him, the typical Québécois, the last of men; the title of **Red** appears in the opening credits boldly printed in blue but, to suggest that the halfbreed finally achieves his identity in death, his name appears in red at the end. Red's given name is Reginald Mackenzie, an indication of society's attempt to impose its own order on the savage or unknown. Names represent a narrowing down

of possibilities and much of Carle's play with names exposes society's fear of the unnameable. Names drawn from the Bible are, of course, abundant in Quebec, and Carle uses the idea of Christian and family names as an example of society's attempt to fit individuals into its mold. Bernadette escapes from the bourgeois identity provided by her husband's name (Brown) but can only assert her freedom by returning to the name she inherited from her father (Bonheur); she is finally crushed by the people who identify her with the saint from whom her Christian name is derived. In attempting to escape from the restrictions symbolized by names, Bernadette (like Marie Chapdelaine and Normande St-Onge, is forced to face up to what Carle calls "the pagan side of the Québécois".

By exposing the inadequacy of film illusion, the inappropriateness of genres, and the loss of identity involved in naming, Carle creates a game which exposes as a game the bundle of conventions and artifice that usually passes for reality. His game grows out of the contradictions of modern Quebec and is one in which the audience is "implicated, individually and collectively". The problems of Quebec are seen as an intensification of the problems of any consumer society: frustration and violence are the result of society's attempt to suppress contradiction. The brothers in **Le viol** turn the complexities of Julie's life into a simple formula of honor violated; the gangster/businessmen of **Red** eliminate the contradiction represented by the halfbreed; the bosses in **La mort d'un bûcheron** violently suppress the stirrings of independence among the workers; and the lawyer in **Normande St-Onge** preserves his reputation by consigning his sister, an eccentric ex-striptease artist, to an asylum. In all cases, the attempt to eliminate contradiction defeats itself because of the violent means used to preserve social quiet.

The implications of a consumer society are central to **Bernadette**. The confined, bourgeois existence against which Bernadette initially rebels is imaged by the framed pictures of vegetables which decorate the walls of her suburban home. Her idealistic rebellion is translated onto



Bernadette's old pals watch in dismay in **La vraie nature de Bernadette**

a political level when the farmers dump vegetables on the highway to protest against the low prices that society is prepared to pay for them. Even this demonstration ends in frustration: the motorists, who have just stripped Bernadette's house in search of religious relics, start loading their cars with free vegetables until Bernadette opens fire on them. The mob's idolatry saves them from the responsibility of solving their own problems and masks a desire to get something for nothing. Similarly the public outcry against the "apemen" in *Les mâles* reveals the essential voyeurism of a society that condemns rape but which is fascinated by the lurid details.



Denise Filiatrault takes matters into her own hands in *La mort d'un bûcheron*



Last year, Carle's film *La tête de Normande St-Onge* was widely publicized at the Cannes film festival

Voyeurism is clearly the most obvious means by which an audience can become implicated in the film experience. Carle has, in fact, been accused of pandering to "le milieu de 'showbiz'" by confining himself to the bourgeois conception of social revolution as a "struggle for sex".<sup>7</sup> Molly Haskell uses *La mort d'un bûcheron* as an example of how "a director, even with all good intentions, can hardly help turn a beautiful woman into a sex object"; she feels that "what starts as an exposé becomes exploitation."<sup>8</sup> But it is precisely the element of exploitation that prevents the film from becoming the kind of exposé that works up righteous indignation but leaves us essentially untouched (since the exploiters are always others). Jean-Pierre Tadros has described the "astonishing complicity between Gilles Carle and Carol Laure" and the films do dwell on the fine line between involvement and exploitation, between the erotic as a heightening of human experience and the erotic as an attempt to escape responsibility.<sup>9</sup> Almost all his films include, literally or metaphorically, the rape of a sweet young girl and this rape is seen as a symbol of the processes of consumer society as well as of the process of film viewing.

Voyeurism and exploitation are seen as products of a desire to remain innocent, to consume without responsibility. Carle argues that "it is necessary to deflower reality so that something new and unexpected can emerge": in *La mort d'un bûcheron* the audience "innocently" becomes part of the society which exploits Marie but then follows her to an awareness of the contradictions of that society (and of the film experience). Julie, in *Le viol*, has been described as "a normal girl living in an abnormal society" whose mind is raped by her environment, but our response to this metaphorical rape remains as ambiguous as that to the actual rape of the hitchhiker, which we see only from the detached perspective of an extreme long shot.<sup>10</sup> Our response to the attempted kidnapping and rape in *Les mâles* is complicated by the girl's sexual teasing and her evident enjoyment of the experience. While the impulsiveness of *St-Pierre and St-Marie* offers a refreshing contrast to the hypocrisy of society, *St-Marie's* sculptures (which inevitably seem to take on the form of female breasts) express both the sexual frustration of the men in the wilderness and their treatment of women as objects. These absurd totem-poles fit into the film's exploration of the relationships between the animal and the human and between nature and art, while the central issue becomes the balancing of the

subjective and the objective both in human relationships and in the experience of film.

The world of Carle's films is one in which individuals have become so subjective, so involved with themselves, that other people have become objects. The searches which provide the basic structure of most of his films are always ultimately searches for a way out of this state of alienation and for a sense of identity. It has been objected that these searches often tend to involve a movement away from the urban centres of modern Quebec and thus to evade an analysis of possible political solutions. Separatism and the language issue, for example, never become central to his films, although Anglo-American economic and cultural imperialism provides a background to all of them (the car show in **Red**, Brown in **Bernadette**, the cowboy outfits worn by many of his *macho* figures). Before their retreat to the backwoods in **Les mâles**, St-Pierre had been involved with union activity and St-Marie had been arrested in a student protest. But their retreat is as ineffective as that of Bernadette, who comes to realize that Thomas' political activism is more practical than her own reliance on "natural" love. **La mort d'un bûcheron** probes the realities of a society structured around paper, a society of "the lumberjack, the Scottish bosses of Canadian International Paper... of the novel, of packing cases and of electronic printing presses". **Les corps célestes** uses its basic metaphor of the brothel to equate prostitution and imperialism and "to show war as impotence, and not as a manifestation of power".

The search brings a new awareness but rarely a sense of release. Red solves the mystery of his half-sister's murder but is gunned down before he can expose her husband's facade of respectability, Léopold Z goes to midnight mass with his family, the runaway lovers return to the brothel in **Les corps célestes**, and Normande St-Onge retreats to a world of sexual fantasy. But the key factor is that the audience's desire for an ending which resolves the issues is frustrated. An insight into Carle's purpose in this can be found in his description of Léopold Z as a "pre-revolutionary" figure who has "many qualities, but they are unemployed".<sup>11</sup> The transition from pre-revolutionary to revolutionary is not made in the film because it has not been made in reality. The audience is denied the satisfaction of a vicarious revolution.

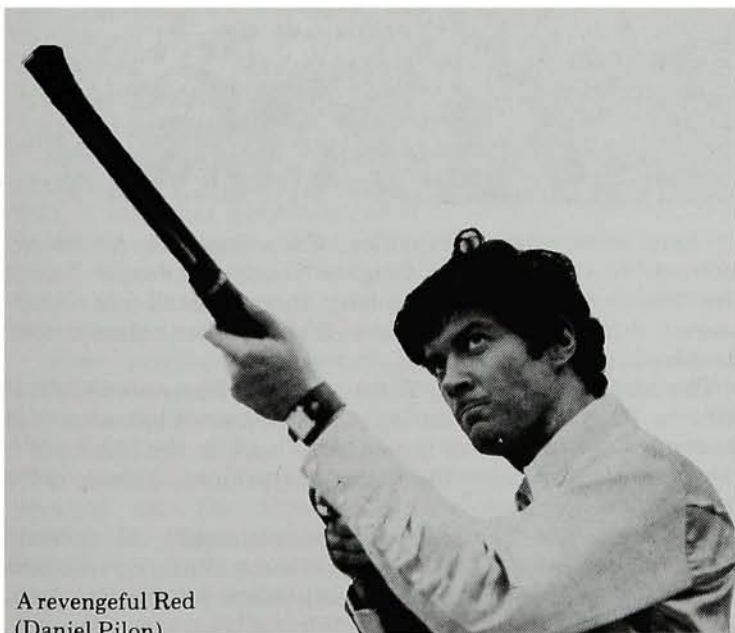
Any resolution of the tensions is left up to the audience, Carle's chief concern being to bring these tensions to the level of consciousness and to point to the multiple levels of reality that must be taken into account before they can be

resolved satisfactorily. The issue of the family, for example, is one that dominates most of Carle's films but his attitude to it remains complex. The family unit in his films has cracked under the pressure of the collapse of traditional values but still fights desperately and destructively to reassert itself. Attempts by Marie Chapdelaine and Normande St-Onge to reconstruct the family are doomed to failure, but alternatives are no more successful. The rigid family of white society might be replaced by a looser structure modeled on the Indian way of life, but Indian society as depicted in **Red** and **A Thousand Moons** has been unable to withstand the pressures of "civilization". Experiments with communal living collapse in **Les mâles**, **Bernadette**, and **Normande St-Onge**: these communes fail to come to terms with the irrational in human nature and lack any true communal basis. Carle has said that if the action of **Les corps célestes** "had taken place today, I would have done it with hippies who want to create a commune, and no longer with a pimp who wants to create a paradise-brothel". The attempt to create a paradise is to impose an absolute from outside (on the model of imperialism) whereas the only possible relationship between individuals must come from within.

What is needed is a social structure that can mediate between the subjectivity of the individual and the objectivity of his world without interposing false myths or escapist dreams. Carle cannot provide the answers, even if he had them, because he would be relieving the individual spectator of his own responsibility. Ultimately Carle's concern is to create "the unexpected film": "The first political step is to increase, not to reduce, the standard of lucidity." Carle's approach is the opposite of that of minimal cinema but his goal is the same: the breaking down of the conventional structures of film viewing in order to encourage a more open and less conditioned response to the structures of society. □

## Notes

1. Piers Handling, 'Themes from Gilles Carle', **Cinéma Canada**, No. 26, March 1976, pp. 28-33.
2. Jean-Pierre Tadros, 'Le Jeu de la séduction', **Cinéma Québec**, Vol. 4, No. 8, pp. 6-8.
3. Pierre Demers, 'Les corps célestes', **Cinéma Québec**, Vol. 3, No. 3, p. 11.
4. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations by Carle are taken from three interviews in **Cinéma Québec**: Vol. 1, No. 9, pp. 17-21; Vol. 2, No. 5, pp. 19-26; Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 28-32. All translations are, unfortunately, my own.
5. Gerald Pratley, 'La vraie nature de Bernadette', in Peter Cowie (ed.), *International Film Guide: 1973* (London: Tantivy Press, 1972), p. 124.
6. Nat Shuster, 'La mort d'un bûcheron', *Motion*, January-February 1974, pp. 49-50.
7. Demers, Loc. Cit., pp. 11, 13.
8. Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), p. 354.
9. Tadros, Loc. Cit., p. 7.
10. Handling, Loc. Cit., p. 30.
11. Quoted in René Prédal, *Jeune Cinéma Canadien* (Paris: Premier Plan, 1967), p. 40.



A revengeful Red  
(Daniel Pilon)