
Gilles Carle writes and directs his own features and has often been successful both artistically and commercially. Twice his films have been chosen to represent Canada at the Cannes Film Festival and rumor has it that his latest feature is in the running this year. Piers Handling follows Carle's career and offers an analysis of the themes in his films.

themes from gilles carle

by Piers Handling



Gilles Carle during the shoot of *Les corps célestes* (1973)

Thematic analysis

Urban absurdity

La vie heureuse de Léopold Z. (1963-65)
Le viol d'une jeune fille douce (1967)
Red (1969)
La mort d'un bûcheron (1972)

Rural escape and definition

Red (1969)
Les mâles (1970)
La vraie nature de Bernadette (1971)
La mort d'un bûcheron (1972)

Quebec woman exploited

Le viol d'une jeune fille douce (1967)
Red (1969)
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La vraie nature de Bernadette (1971)
La mort d'un bûcheron (1972)
Les corps célestes (1973)
La tête de Normande St-Onge (1975)

With the release of *La vie heureuse de Léopold Z.* in 1965, it was obvious that a new talent had arrived on the scene. Ten years later, and with eight features under his belt, we have seen the release of Carle's latest film *La tête de Normande St-Onge*. Carle's output, while not prolific, has certainly been steady and of a quality that has raised him into the front ranks of Quebec cinema. He is also a filmmaker who has remained remarkably faithful to his roots and while this does not preclude a broadening of his vision, it has allowed him to refine his statements. Within his work it strikes me that there are certain identifiable themes that deserve analysis. While Carle is not a 'difficult' filmmaker, he has tended towards visual allegory, and my reaction to *La tête de Normande St-Onge* prompted me to 'place' this film in some context. *Normande St-Onge* appears to mark a new step for Carle, but while it moves forward in new directions it is also firmly rooted in the films that preceded it. On reading most of the interviews, reviews, and critiques, both English and French, on Carle, I have always been left with a vaguely unsatisfied feeling, as if the authors have not fully comprehended what it is that Carle is really trying to do with his films. I offer the following then as a tentative base for further examination, and as Carle's work has been largely inaccessible to English audiences, perhaps it will lead them to a desire to see the films, or to look at them in a new light.

Categories tend to be somewhat facile and pompous, but approaching Carle's work I detected three major trends that are roughly chronological. Realizing that these categories by no means include all of Carle's themes, they are useful in an analysis of Carle's work as a whole.

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Urban absurdity

Carle's first feature, *La vie heureuse de Léopold Z.*, is evidently a germinal work. Produced rather accidentally* it has a charmingly rambling feel to it, and coupled with the character of Léopold it is easy to view it as a film of gentle observation, rather than conscious statement. Episodic in structure, and full of comic invention, it follows the day of Léopold, a snow-plow driver, on Christmas Eve, the day of a big storm, as he tries to find time to do a series of errands, while evading the eyes of his supervisor. But it is also a film replete with instances of a man who is vaguely uneasy about his place in society – a society that cannot deal with his demands, no matter how unarticulated they are. Throughout we are shown how the mechanical subtly dominates people's lives. The film opens with Léopold trying to start his truck while his wife hangs a telephone receiver out of the upstairs window so he can talk to his irate supervisor who wants to know where the hell he is. He is told when asking for a bank loan that this hole in the computer card means that he has once been three weeks late on a payment. We see Josita trying to get into the night club she is booked into, only to be told through a loudspeaker above the door that she has to ring a doorbell that she can hardly reach. Within all this Carle sketches a milieu that is at once disturbing, comical and continually present. On the radio we hear of a bank being robbed by three men disguised as Santa Claus, and in one of the most telling sequences in the film, Josita, in the shower, assumes that the person who rushes in and out of the house is a sex maniac. Of course it is only Léopold, frantically dressing for mass, but Carle undercuts the humour of the scene with Josita's spontaneous reaction, a reaction which we can only assume has been conditioned into her. *Léopold Z.* has an air of unease to it, a sense that things are happening so quickly in the background, in the world around us, that we have little time to absorb it all.



Guy L'Ecuyer as Léopold Z.

Yet it also highlights an individual's conflict with aspects of life that threaten to overtake him. The continual fight against time is something that Léopold is forced to be conscious of because of the restrictions of his job. He has to find time to pick up the fur coat which is his wife's Christmas present, he has to negotiate a small loan to pay for the coat, and he has to pick up Josita at the train station. When Léopold looks out at the hundreds of cars stuck in the storm during rush hour he mutters "Why didn't you stay home. Now we have to work like slaves on Christmas Eve." He sees his chances of making midnight mass disappear due to the selfish anonymity of people who have driven their cars to work. Léopold tells Josita that he once tried to get a job

* It was originally to be a short on snow removal but Carle, under the noses of the NFB, expanded it into a feature.

as an excavator when they were building the Métro, but he was turned down – once a snow-plowman, always a snow-plowman. It is with this statement that Carle makes his most subversive comment, an indictment of a system that pigeon-holes people and their aspirations.

In *Le viol d'une jeune fille douce* the tapestry of absurdity is more defined. We begin with a shot of a couple sitting a few feet apart on a park bench, talking to each other through walkie-talkies, and this scene sets the tone for everything that follows. It is in essence a film about a normal girl living in an abnormal society, and in the same way that the *elle* in Godard's *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* refers not only to the woman in the film but also to Paris, the rape in *Le viol* alludes not only to the actual rape that the brothers commit, but also to what is being done to Julie's mind. Living in a slightly absurd, disquieting society that forms the backdrop to the film, Julie is an emotional cipher – her being is dominated by what surrounds her. Discovering that she is pregnant, and not knowing who the father is, she flirts with the idea of an abortion but instead decides to take a lover – a Moroccan who is new to Canada and is trying to find his way about.

One of the most disturbing things in the film is the suicide of Susan, her neighbor. Opening the door one morning to go to work, Julie is confronted with a dead body being carried down the stairs by the police. Turning to tell her lover, and her girl friend, who is also living with her, she cannot wake them. Descending into the street, she occupies the place left by the ambulance that we have just seen drive off with Susan's body. The overriding impression we are left with is of people who are incapable of absorbing certain aspects of life or who do not want to deal with them.

The three brothers, modern day gangsters, named after angels (Raphael, Gabriel and Joachim) only add to the uneasy feeling of distortion. Their rape of the girl, a hitchhiker they have picked up, is unmotivated, and combined with Julie's non-reaction while sitting quietly in the car, is extremely disturbing. The subsequent arbitrary finding of a man whom they convince themselves is the father of Julie's unborn child, which culminates with them taking a picture of him for future reference, adds to our feeling of unease. The film is full of such instances – Julie trying to give her new-born baby away, leaving it in the back seat of the car that somebody drives off with, collecting the baby from the police station, typing the autobiography of her Moroccan lover, her girl friend running off with an Australian only to return days later, and Susan listening to music that obviously exists just in her head. *Le viol* sees Carle stretching himself filmically and artistically, and with this sense of actions that have no motive, and which are often incomplete and semi-farcical, he has found a perfect form for expression.

The impetus of this movement sees its most complete expression in *Red*, where what formed the backdrop to *Le viol* here intrudes more forcibly into the film, until it concludes with Red's brutal destruction at the film's end. *Red* is a portrait of a half-breed who lives in both his white half and his Indian half. He expresses all the contradictions of our society, and even if the tensions within the man are not completely dealt with by Carle, his conflict with the society that spawned him is graphically depicted. Red himself is an uneasy amalgam of modern-day playboy, frontiersman and small-time gangster. He is at war with his 'family' – a curious mixture of half-brothers, and a half-sister and her husband, Frédéric. Red is involved in a car theft ring and the film opens after he has stolen from Frédéric's car business. Everywhere that Carle turns his cool eye we have evidence of duplicity, cruelty and unhappiness. The absurdity of much of what happens is again terribly upsetting. Red's mother dies for no apparent reason other than almost willing it upon herself, and Red's half sister Elisa



Daniel Pilon plays Red, supported by Katherine Mousseau and Raymond Cloutier.

beth is gruesomely killed by an anonymous sniper outside her home, as she carries groceries into the house. A stag party given for the impending marriage of one of the half-brothers is grotesque in the extreme, and ends in a whore being viciously stabbed in the leg for failing to arouse the groom-to-be. When Red escapes into the wilds of Quebec, it is only to stumble across a wilderness community of smugglers, which lives off the urban society that surrounds it. We are introduced to a couple of its members as they are dismantling a police car, prior to transporting it bit by bit across the lake to their camp. It soon becomes obvious that this group, like Red, are urban dropouts who have been driven into the bush. Unhappy with his new surroundings, and realizing that escape is no solution, Red is drawn back into the metropolis that he cannot escape. He decides to confront his pursuers, only to be gunned down in front of Frédéric, ironically in the middle of a car show being held in Place Bonaventure.

With *Red* Carle had reached a transitional phase as a filmmaker. This theme of dissatisfaction with urban life was temporarily laid to rest and, while it has not been banished from his films, it does not pre-occupy him in quite the same way.

Rural escape

The film that bridged the gap from Carle's first major preoccupation, to his second, was *Red*. Society had pushed Red and his girl-friend from the city into the countryside – the Canadian bush. However, for Red, a half-breed, the transposition was not successful. In effect he is more of a white man than an Indian, having adopted most of the external trappings of modern society. Furthermore Carle shows that rural Quebec society has not remained untouched either. Unsentimental in his approach, Carle strips away

the mythology of the great untouched Canadian outdoors to expose it as a hollow misconception. Bill Sullivan, the leader of the gang of smugglers who inhabit this otherwise deserted part of Quebec, personifies all of these contradictions. A Québécois speaking broad joul, he is given an English name, and when we are first introduced to him, he is sitting outside, watching his portable television set on a tree stump. Even the bizarre surveyor who pitches his tent on the perimeter of the little camp is an ominous foreshadowing of the intrusion of a society that is never very far away.

But it is with **Les mâles** and **La vraie nature de Bernadette** that Carle turns to this theme with full force. On the surface **Les mâles** presents us with what can be interpreted as an idealized retreat into the joys of nature. The two men retire into the bush, presumably to escape the vagaries of a hostile world. This is treated more thoroughly when they trundle off to the local village, desperate for a woman after their months of isolation. Choosing the daughter of the local police chief, they kidnap her and set off a bizarre, manic, almost wild-west chase, which ends with them in jail. They manage to escape and, lessons learnt, – society still does not understand them – they return to their camp, only to find the mirage of Rita Sauvage – the answer to their dreams, the unfettered, uncomplicated woman. Setting up a ménage-à-trois, their idyllic retreat blooms as Rita dispenses her sexual favours with complete freedom. However, inevitably it seems, masculine jealousies begin to cloud the horizon and when the two men come to blows, Rita vanishes as quickly and as quietly as she came. The men suspend hostilities, reunited by their common aim to find Rita, a search that is never concluded but which finds them finally in Montreal, trying to find her through meditation. Throughout the course of **Les mâles** we see that disassociation with civilization, or contemporary values, is extremely difficult – if not impossible. Saddled by a cultural baggage that cannot be easily discarded, their new lifestyle is doomed, and when presented with an opportunity to establish a new form of living arrangement, their machismo blinds them to their selfishness. Alone and confused by the film's end, they are almost in a state of suspension as they grope towards some type of self-awareness.



Andrée Pelletier as Rita Sauvage keeping the home fires warm in **Les mâles**

La vraie nature de Bernadette was to cover much of the same ground but in a more forceful manner, with many of the tensions held in a finer balance. Bernadette, alone in her apartment one day, impulsively packs up and leaves the city with her child to start a new life in the country. Pursuing a line of development begun with Rita Sauvage, Carle turned Bernadette into the most complex character he had yet dealt with. She is an earth mother, and Carle portrays her with immense charm, vitality and energy. Bernadette, in her return to nature is determined to discover the joys and the simplicity of country living. There she will be able to express her true nature. Ample and generous, she becomes the centre of a community that relies on her energy, and the simplicity of country living. There she will be able to share herself with anyone who needs her help, yet it is obvious that there is a naiveté to her which is extremely dangerous, while also being seductively attractive. The destruction of Bernadette's dream is ruthless and cruel, but ultimately necessary for her growth, as she begins to comprehend the fact that one cannot escape from reality, or from the imperfections of human nature. While Carle recognizes the inherent attractions of his heroine's move to the country, he is aware of the moralistic, evangelist impulse that motivates Bernadette. She too is saddled with a cultural heritage that views nature as an unspoiled rustic haven. But finally Bernadette is soberly forced to re-evaluate her ideas. Taking up a gun to support Thomas and the farmworkers in their struggle, she has begun to understand his hard-nosed, practical nature, a characteristic that had previously irritated her, as Thomas did not conform to her idea of what a farmer was and should be.

This move towards self-awareness is also to be found in **La mort d'un bûcheron**, which immediately succeeded **Bernadette**. Like **Red**, Bernadette provided a bridge to another step in Carle's career, for until that film Carle's world had been predominantly a man's world. Subsequently he was to turn his attention towards the plight of women in Quebec, a theme that he is still obsessed with.

Quebec woman exploited

Carle had not ignored women in his films, but until **Bernadette** they tended to be peripheral characters. In **Le viol d'une jeune fille douce** he had dealt with a young, modern girl in a cold abstract way, but her concerns were overshadowed by his desire to sketch a portrait of what surrounded the girl, rather than to treat her as the primary figure in the film. In both **Red** and **Les mâles**, women are similarly in the background or not treated in depth. **Red's** girlfriend is the first example of a woman in Carle's film who is frustrated and angered by the traditional sex roles. Rita Sauvage is more of a catalyst in **Les mâles** than a fully realized character. But Rita provided the basis for what was to become Bernadette, Carle's first complete and complex female. But it was in **La mort d'un bûcheron** and the two features that followed that Carle was to turn his full focus on women in Quebec society.

La mort d'un bûcheron is a withering indictment of the exploitation of a young girl who comes to Montreal to find a father who has disappeared. Bewildered and jobless, she looks up an old friend of her mother's, Armande St-Amour, and gets a job with him as a topless singer after innocently auditioning as a folk singer. He is ruthless and cruel, beating her viciously one night when she arrives late for one of her shows. She takes up with a young journalist, François Paradis, who vows to help, but ends up exploiting her to further his own career, persuading her to do a sensual, semi-nude dance for a lecherous, but influential, old man. And finally she drifts from Armande and his bar into commercial advertising and modelling where she is invariably used as a nude mannequin. She is used by men at every turn – used for her beauty, used by those who can help her



Carole Laure as go-go dancer in *La mort d'un bûcheron*

find her father, and used by people who see her as an object and a titillation. Suffocated by this overwhelming masculine influence, which ironically provides the impetus for the film in the sense that Maria is attempting to discover what happened to her father, *La mort d'un bûcheron* chronicles Maria's slow, painful move towards some type of liberation. After she has finally found out the fate that befell her father, her boyfriend pushes her into making love with him. Freed of her father's shadow, will this male become her new oppressor? In a sequence that is one of the most moving in all of Carle's cinema, she pushes him away, and outside in the full light of day reflects in an off-screen narration that finally she is free. Although she is also alone, it is an ending tinged with optimism – unique in Carle's oeuvre.

Les corps célestes was not to have this ray of hope. It remains Carle's only period piece, and dealing as it does with a pimp and his covey of prostitutes in a mining town in pre-Second World War Quebec, it continues Carle's devotion to this theme. Ambitious in scope, it is perhaps a trifle imperfect in execution, as if Carle could not balance all of what he wanted to communicate. Paralleling the establishment of a whore-house with the impending war in Europe, Carle satirizes certain things in an incomplete fashion. But if Desmond is determined to juggle all the conflicting forces of the town – the church, the miners, and his harem of girls, one of whom he is attracted to – it allows Carle to comment again on a masculine society that is primarily concerned with using its women. Rose-Marie, Desmond's new flame, is subjected to all his jealousies and rages when she does not submit to his desires. Instead she has found a rather innocuous lover of her own, whom she eventually runs off with. However it ends with their return to the protection of Desmond and his whore-house when he, and consequently she, cannot survive in the world outside. Her subjugation is complete. After the breath of optimism that ended *La mort d'un bûcheron*, Carle executes a total about-face.

The bleak implications of *Les corps célestes* were obviously not a vagary in Carle's development, as *La tête de Normande St-Onge* confirms in a rather emphatic fashion. Normande has certain elements in common with Bernadette. She is the centre of a group of people who depend on her for all kinds of things, and who all make a series of different demands on her. She will be used and exploited by everyone.



Desmond (Donald Pilon) and his girls in *Les corps célestes*

While she gives, they take, and Normande, desperate for love herself, is eventually driven mad by their insatiable wishes. She gives money to her sister who doesn't even bother to visit their mother in the hospital, she cares for an elderly neighbour who ends up by declaring that Normande never did anything for her, and she is used by a sculptor who freezes her beauty into a nude statue while hardly concealing his desire for her. She brings her boyfriend a book as a present, on a subject that means a great deal to him, yet the only way he interacts with her is on a sexual level which leaves Normande unsatisfied. Carol, the magician, at first kind and open, angrily and selfishly denounces her for sleeping with her lout of a boyfriend. Normande's motives are totally self-effacing – she wants to have her mother with her, a mother who has been consigned to an insane asylum by an intolerant brother. Even here great pain is caused when her mother shows a preference for her sister, while virtually ignoring Normande. Worn down on all sides, Normande finds it increasingly difficult to deal with reality, and turns to sexual dreams and fantasies where she is always the centre of attention, and where she assumes the dominant role. The final image of Normande, who cannot register any emotion or feeling, finally mad, is if nothing else a protective device, but the eye that looks out at us is only staring into the void.

Conclusion

As has been evident throughout, Carle has remained remarkably faithful to a few major themes. While they cannot explain all the elements that constitute his films, they can provide a structure within which to approach his work. But before ending I would like to touch on a few more points. After seeing *La tête de Normande St-Onge* it struck me that it was less a film about madness, and its interchange between mother and daughter, than a film about an attempt to construct and re-establish the family unit. In reflection is this not what all of his films are about? They are all concerned with the family in some way, whether it is the demands it places on Léopold on Christmas Eve, the protective impulse which results in violence, death and rape in *Le viol d'une jeune fille douce* and *Red*, the ménage in *Les mâles*, the attempt to establish an extended family in *Bernadette* based on rural values, the search for the father in *La mort d'un*

bûcheron, the pimp and his family of whores in **Les corps célestes**, and the search for the mother in **La tête de Normande St-Onge**. That this move towards setting up some equivalent to the family is never achieved, is not a result of an artistic failing, as has so often been levelled at Carle (i.e. he doesn't know how to end his movies) but it is obvious on the evidence of the films his view is becoming bleaker and more despairing.

Furthermore the characters in the films are generally in the process of defining themselves. In **Red** it results in confrontation and death, but it shows that escape is no answer. The two men in **Les mâles** realize what they have destroyed by the end of that film and have come to more of an awareness of their devious impulses. Bernadette is continually in the process of refining her attitudes and ideals until she reaches some kind of understanding, which serves as a basis for action. Maria Chapdelaine explores her father's past in an attempt to purge herself until she is finally free. And finally Normande essentially follows the same path as Maria Chapdelaine, but here the self-definition is not allowed to take place – in its place there is its opposite, fragmentation. The first scene in **Normande St-Onge** centres around Normande wondering if she will ever have a child. And while there is this obsessive search for the family unit during the film, and to some extent her mother almost becomes a surrogate child for Normande, everything is doomed to failure and nothing is ever allowed to consolidate. Normande's thoughts remain just that, thoughts. Carle's characters more often than not remain alone in a cruel world by the end of the films.

There is one other aside, a question that has intrigued and mystified me. Images of fruit and vegetables abound in his films in the strangest contexts. It makes its first appearance in **Le viol**, when during the rape Carle cuts back to Julie in the car eating an apple. In the next film **Red's** half sister is murdered and she is shown in a pool of blood, surrounded by the fruit she has been carrying into the house. In **Bernadette** there are numerous examples: the film opens on framed paintings of a carrot, a beet, a cucumber and a tomato. Bernadette drives into the country with the back seat of her convertible stuffed with bananas. The three old men play pool on her kitchen table using oranges for balls, and of course there is the image of the farmers dumping all their produce on the highway. And in **Normande St-Onge**, Normande's boyfriend is obsessed with mushrooms. What do these images mean? Contrasted with this is his increasing use of sculptures of one sort or another – the papier-maché heads of the lumberjacks in **La mort d'un bûcheron**, and the nude sculpture that Normande is posing for in **La tête de Normande St-Onge**. For me these props have always had a disturbing edge to them – they appear where they don't really belong and are perhaps ultimately unexplainable. But on the other hand could they not be images of sterility and growth, images that match the tone and the mood of the films. The sculptures have a frozen, sterile quality to them, haunting and devoid of emotion. In **La mort d'un bûcheron** they anticipate and are reminders of the deaths of the lumberjacks. One could argue that the sculpture in **Normande St-Onge** serves a similar function. But they are also images of the past, of something that is frozen in time, and will not develop or grow any further. The use of fruit and vegetables ironically provides a similar effect, for when they are used, more often than not they counterpoint something that is in a state of disruption, or which has stopped growing. But I would hesitate to 'classify' these images in only one manner, as they are open to a multitude of interpretations – the use of fruit in **Bernadette** seems to serve a different role.

What is intriguing is the direction that Carle will now follow. Only **Red** has as nihilistic an ending as **La tête de Normande St-Onge**, but Carle showed that he had the ability to grow beyond that film. The fact that he has left his partnership with Pierre Lamy in Les Productions Carle

Lamy, and shot a film for the CBC in Toronto points towards a need he must feel for change. On the evidence of the films he has much to give us yet. □



Carol (Reynald Bouchard) and Normande (Carole Laure) in **La tête de Normande St-Onge**

Gilles Carle's Filmography

Shorts (over 350 in all since 1960)

Manger (30 mn) 1961.

Dimanche d'Amérique (28 mn) 1961.

Patinoire (10 mn) 1962.

Natation (27 mn) 1963.

Patte Mouille (10 mn) 1963.

Solange dans nos campagnes (26 mn) 1964.

Un air de famille (28 mn) 1964.

Perce on the rocks (10 mn) 1964.

Le Québec à l'heure de l'Expo (20 mn) 1967.

Stéréo (10 mn) 1971.

Les chevaux ont-ils des ailes (18 mn) 1974.

Television

Place à Olivier Guimond (60 mn) 1966.

Place aux Jérolas (60 mn) 1967.

Un hiver brûlant (52 mn) 1971.

Les chevaliers (55 mn) 1971.

A thousand moons (50 mn) 1975.

Feature Films

La vie heureuse de Léopold Z. (1965).

Le viol d'une jeune fille douce (1968).

Red (1969).

Les mâles (1970).

La vraie nature de Bernadette (1971).

La mort d'un bûcheron (1972).

Les corps célestes (1973).

La tête de Normande St-Onge (1975).