

Madeleine is...

BY André Loiselle

Canadian film history of sorts was made on April 22, 1971, when Sylvia Spring's *Madeleine Is...* opened in Toronto. It was the first Canadian fiction feature film directed by a woman, coming out a year before Mireille Dansereau's *La Vie rêvée*, which was released July 27, 1972. The film tells the story of Madeleine (Nicola Lipman), a French-Canadian woman living in Vancouver, who seeks to find herself in a world where homeless people, socialist poseurs and fashion designers co-exist. While involved in an abusive relationship with Toro (John Juliani), a sadistic leftist, Madeleine fantasizes about a clown who embodies her elusive happiness. She eventually meets David (Wayne Specht), a kind but ineffectual nerd whom she (mis)recognizes as her imaginary

clown. The relationship with David proves

WORTH

A
SECOND

LOOK



as unfulfilling, albeit less degrading, than with Toro. Madeleine eventually transcends her dependency on men and discovers her own identity as an artist, which is what the clown represented all along.

Prior to its release, the film attracted some attention precisely because a feature directed by a woman represented a significant step forward for the young Canadian film industry. In newspaper profiles on Spring and Lipman published before the premiere, one can sense a certain excitement about the production, which could have turned out to be a female response to *Goin' down the Road* (1970).

Hailed as "the very model of a modern woman liberationist" by one journalist in *The Toronto Star*, romanticized by another "as a young beautiful but penniless filmmaker" who had to put up with "a constant dribble of sexual propositions" from potential producers (*The Globe and Mail*). Spring became for a short time a hot topic of conversation among those who believed that Canadian cinema had finally arrived.

In spite of the minor hype surrounding its release, or perhaps because of it, the film was a failure. A year later, Spring wrote in the original *Take One*: "I got noticed and singled out as a young woman filmmaker and thus got a lot of media coverage that I probably wouldn't have got were I not a woman. In retrospect I think this attention did more harm than good both to my ego and to the success of the film."¹ To quote Kay Armatage, who reviewed it for *Take One*, "*Madeleine Is...* died after exactly one week at Toronto's New Yorker Cinema, where Shebib's *Goin' down the Road* played for 19 weeks."² Martin



Nicola Lipman

Images courtesy of the National Archives of Canada.

Knelman, who detested the film, wrote in his review for *The Globe and Mail*: "I can't think of anything encouraging to say about it. The material is whimsical, self-indulgent and banal and, if anything, it's made to seem even worse by the clumsy, amateurish way it's been filmed.... This movie does not represent a new plateau in the growth of the Canadian feature film industry, as we're being led to believe. But it does, I think, illustrate a pattern which is important and potentially disastrous: currents in this country nurture the self-deception and self-indulgences of aspiring amateur filmmakers who want to act out their fantasies in front of a camera without any experience or knowledge of how movies are made."

Since these nasty words were printed, Spring's film has almost entirely disappeared from Canadian film history. Often *Madeleine Is...* is not even mentioned in books on Canadian cinema. No one in Seth Feldman's anthology *Take Two: A Tribute to Canadian Film* has anything to say about it, and David Clandfield does not refer to it either in his *Canadian Film*. More recent books also ignore the film entirely. Neither Vancouver-based reviewer Katherine Monk in *Weird Sex & Snowshoes and Other Canadian Film Phenomena* nor Christopher Gittings in *Canadian National Cinema* even acknowledge that the film exists; and *Take One's Essential Guide to Canadian Film* does not have entries for either *Madeleine Is...* or Sylvia Spring. Perhaps most appalling is the fact that the film receives no recognition whatsoever in *Gendering the Nation: Canadian Women's Cinema*. It's indeed rather shocking—and even a bit sad—that a collection of essays devoted to cinema by women in Canada would not even have a footnote crediting Spring for making the first feature fiction film directed by a woman in this country (to say nothing of the fact that Tanya Ballantyne Tree's landmark documentary *The Things I Cannot Change* is also ignored in *Gendering the Nation*).

Ironically, the few critics and historians who have paid some attention to the film have been men. In his often-cited article "Coward, Bully or Clown," Robert Fothergill devotes almost half-a-paragraph to Toro and David as variations on the bully, coward and clown figures.³ Jim Leach in the Canadian cinema section of *Understanding Movies* also spends about half-a-paragraph on the film, comparing it to *La Vie rêvée*.⁴ Dave Douglas in *Guide to the Cinema(s) of Canada* gives it a brief but positive assessment, praising especially Spring's "strong social sense" and her use of *musique concrète*.⁵ The most complimentary commentaries on the film are from Colin Browne and Peter Morris. Browne spends a couple of paragraphs in his "Il était une fois Hollywood North" explaining how even if the film now seems a bit naive, it still attests to the emergence of a feminist sensitivity in Canadian cinema.⁶ Peter Morris, evidently the film's biggest fan, calls *Madeleine Is ...* a "remarkable feature" that has "a clear feminist orientation in its portrayal of Madeleine, who at the end moves on to a state of self-possession."⁷ But neither Browne



John Juliani and Tandy Johnson.

nor Morris, nor any other scholar listed above, have offered readings of the film that go beyond cursory observation. To this day, the most extensive commentaries on the film remain the reviews—ranging from mildly enthusiastic to outright contemptuous—that came out at the time of its release.

The purpose of what follows is not to claim that *Madeleine Is ...* is a "remarkable feature." It isn't, but then again, neither is *Goin' down the Road*. Rather, my intention is to explain why Spring's film has never found its place in Canadian film history or within the discourse surrounding women's cinema. Granted that the metaphor of the clown is somewhat awkward and that there are weaknesses in terms of acting, narrative structure and musical score; these flaws do not explain the film's exclusion from the canon. Dansereau's *La Vie rêvée* is far from being a perfect film, and yet it has received a fair amount of attention in books from *Take Two* to *Gendering the Nation*. In fact, Spring's film has a few very powerful moments—such as when Toro tries to force David and Madeleine to have sex, threatening them with a hammer—and some strikingly expressionistic shots of downtown Vancouver. But regardless of its uneven technical and artistic quality, I would argue that the indifference from which the film has suffered results mainly from two factors: its politics and its style.

In a conversation I had with Spring a few years ago, she speculated that the negative response the film received when it was released could be explained in part by its criticism of the Left, especially in the depiction of Toro. Played by the intense Vancouver actor John Juliani, Toro comes across, initially at least, as a dedicated leader whose revolutionary ideas are intriguing. However, parallel to his role as the head

of a group of hippies, he is also constructed as a violent chauvinist who imposes his despotic rules on Madeleine; including his decree against her wearing underwear so he can have "access" to her whenever he wants. While at the end of the film there is no doubt as to Toro's megalomaniac insanity—when he threatens Madeleine and David with a hammer—for most of the film he is not presented as a mere caricature of the self-proclaimed revolutionary. It's precisely because Toro can be perceived as both a charismatic Che Guevara-type and a sexist bastard that the film was so difficult to accept for many film critics.

Back in the early 1970s, anyone interested enough in Canadian culture and identity to bother writing about Canadian cinema would have probably claimed *some* predisposition toward the Left. Not surprisingly, a left-wing activist being characterized as a chauvinist pig was deemed inappropriate by many. A case in point is *The Toronto Star* reviewer Daniel Stoffman, who hated the film as much as Knelman: "The real low point is reached in the character of Toro. Here, Miss Spring (who, with Kenneth Specht co-authored the script) displays a political imagination as lurid as that of your average Texas oil millionaire. As played by Juliani, Toro is the left-wing radical of every fascist's fondest fantasies. He's also a huffing, puffing villain in the tradition of 19th-century theatrical melodrama."

Stoffman's rhetoric is revealing. For him it is inconceivable for a Canadian filmmaker to be critical of the Left without being in cohort with the rightist-of-right-wing

America—Texas. It is impossible, without deserving to be called a fascist, to suggest that men on either side of the political spectrum can be abusive. Yet there were—and still are—

sadistic lefties. As Spring said in an article published in *The Toronto Star* shortly before the release of the film, "I went through several men in that milieu... this type of man needs to assert himself and dominate a woman and control her. Some women need this."

Significantly, Kay Armatage, in her *Take One* review which is by no means unequivocal in its praise, is more attuned

to Spring's criticism of male social activists than Stoffman. "Spring's film achieves something fairly difficult: it takes people of five varying social types—the confused young girl; the gawky straight young clerk; the power-mad revolutionary; the middle-class drop out; and the poor old alcoholic—and never once treats them as stereotypes or without generosity. Even Toro is put down on highly principled grounds. The camera looks straight at the actors...with no glamorizing and no distortion."⁸ Armatage sees Toro, unlike Stoffman, not as a stereotypical villain but as an individual, which the film criticizes on its own terms. Although Armatage shows a better understanding of Spring's intentions than her male counterparts, she cannot be regarded as a strong promoter of the film. She is the co-editor of *Gendering the Nation*, a book that conspicuously excludes *Madeleine Is...* from the feminist canon of Canadian cinema.

The reason for Armatage's lack of interest in Spring's film, I would argue, is a matter of stylistics. In a short pamphlet called *Reverse Angle: Feminist Filmmaking*, Armatage defines feminist film practice in the early 1970s. "Women worked predominantly in documentary," Armatage says, "because not only were they suspicious of fictional drama from their experience with Hollywood and television, but because they saw in documentary an opportunity to present real women. Feminist filmmaking at that time was virtually defined as the documentary portraits of women either as individuals or as women struggling to solve problems in their own lives and achieve feminist consciousness. By the mid-1970s there was a considerable body of feminist films. It was in this milieu and in this definition of feminist filmmaking that in 1975 I made my first film, a half-hour cinéma-vérité documentary about Jill Johnston. That film was made in what, in retrospect, seems almost a formula of feminist filmmaking practice. We shot events as they happened, in a cinéma-vérité style, with the crew and equipment sometimes visible. This style of filmmaking was accepted as a kind of transparent window on reality, with the presence of the crew and equipment seen not as flaws or signs of lack of professionalism, but signifiers of truth, a repudiation of manipulation."⁹ My purpose here is not to challenge the historical accuracy of Armatage's description of early 1970s "formula of feminist filmmaking practice." Rather, I want to suggest that if she saw the cinéma-vérité style as virtually defining feminist filmmaking at that time, then it is not surprising that she would exclude *Madeleine Is...* from the canon, for this film shares little with what Armatage sees as the exclusive mode of practice for women filmmakers in the 1970s.

First, *Madeleine Is...* was a fiction film at a time when, according to Armatage, women were "suspicious of fictional drama." But more importantly, it's a fiction that undermines explicitly documentary tradition by showing Madeleine's fantasy world, i.e., the clown. Documentaries, as "creative treatments of actuality" to quote John Grierson, can show many things but they can't show the figments of people's imagination. Furthermore, Spring actually makes a subtle but important point about the need for representation rather than simple documentation. In the second half of the film, Madeleine eventually finds her artistic voice by painting or drawing, not photographing the down-and-out people who live around the corner of Main and Hastings. Reality, for Madeleine, has meaning only after it has been filtered through her imagination. Similarly, her interest in fashion design suggests a need to reconfigure the fabric of reality to

Sylvia Spring





Madeleine Is... made no attempt to expose the device, using none of the *ostranenie* gimmicks so common among 1960s and 1970s *engagé* films, and therefore fell in the category of suspicious fictional drama.

Since the 1990s, a number of female filmmakers have followed in Spring's footsteps, making films that go all out into a world of fantasy without exposing the cinematic device. One thinks of Lynne Stopkewich's *Kissed* (1997) and Patricia Rozema's *When Night Is Falling* (1995), for instance, or even Rozema's earlier, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987), whose display of the apparatus (in the form of a video camera and photographic equipment) brings the viewer deeper into the fantasy world of the

main character, Polly, rather than undermining it as suspicious fiction. The same could be said of Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* (1995), in which the technique of direct address to the audience and Jade's flights of theatrical performance are meant to bring the spectator closer to the character's fictional universe rather than distancing us from it. But by the time such films were released, it seemed to have already been much too late for *Madeleine Is...* to be rediscovered as a precursor of these works.

The purpose of this article has not been to suggest that *Madeleine Is...* is a forgotten masterpiece that should be screened in every Canadian film course. Rather, I only wished to reclaim a work that might not be the best movie ever made in this country, but is doubtlessly worth a place in Canadian film history. *Madeleine Is...* is in fact only one of many significant Canadian films that have not received the critical attention they deserve. This special issue of *Take One* is a promising step towards remedying the situation. TAKE ONE

create something other than the real. In the same way,

Spring often uses expressive camera angles to recast Vancouver as a threatening urban environment with buildings looming over people and *musique concrète* accompanying the chaotic visuals that interrupt the self-discovery narrative. Such representations of Vancouver offer a much more affective impression of the city than what Don Shebib achieves with Toronto in *Goin' down the Road*. Spring's approach stands in radical contrast with the realist tradition of 1960s and 1970s Canadian cinema in general and is fundamentally opposed to the putatively non-manipulative *cinéma-vérité* style that "virtually defined" feminist films at the time.

There are moments of fantasy and visual distortion in Dansereau's thoroughly canonized *La Vie rêvée*. But there is a fundamental difference between the two films, besides the fact, of course, that Dansereau's film had the advantage of coming from exotic Québec. This difference is brought to the fore in the beginning of the films. *Madeleine Is...* begins by positioning the spectator inside the mind of the central fictional character by making us hear the voice of her father and her voice translating his as she is reading his letter. For the rest of the film, Spring continues to make us see and hear the world through *Madeleine's* perspective. *La Vie rêvée*, on the other hand, after having turned a few "experimental" tricks such as slow-motion homemovies, shows the two main actresses (Liliane Lemaitre-Auger and Véronique Le Flaguais) addressing us as actresses, introducing themselves and saying that the film was produced by "la Co-op" (L'Association coopérative des productions audio-visuelles). This establishes a distance between the spectator and the film. The Brechtian *verfremdungseffekte*—to use 1970s artsy parlance—created at the beginning of *La Vie rêvée* exposes the cinematic apparatus in a way that is not unlike what Armatage saw in feminist documentaries of the early 1970s.

Notes:

1. *Take One*, November/December 1970, p. 10.
2. *Take One*, May/June 1970, p. 27.
3. Robert Fothergill, "Coward, Bully, or Clown: The Dream—Life of a Younger Brother," *The Canadian Film Reader* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1977), p. 240.
4. Louis Giannetti and Jim Leach, *Understanding Movies, Second Canadian Edition* (Toronto: Prentice Hall, 2001), pp. 348–9.
5. Dave Douglas, *The Guide to the Cinema(s) of Canada*. Edited by Peter Harry Rist (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 2001), p. 135.
6. Colin Browne, "Il était une fois Hollywood North," *Les Cinémas du Canada*. Edited by Sylvain Garel and André Pâquet (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 1992), pp. 181–2.
7. Peter Morris, *The Film Companion* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1984), pp. 188, 280.
8. *Take One*, May/June 1970, p. 27.
9. Kay Armatage, *Reverse Angle: Feminist Filmmaking* (Toronto: Centre for Women's Studies in Education, 1989).