

# VANCOUVER IS...

*Defining the City in Sylvia Spring's Madeleine Is ... (1971)*

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**BEST KNOWN AS THE FIRST** narrative feature to be directed by a woman in Canada, Sylvia Spring's *Madeleine Is ...* should also be recognized as one of the best documents of Vancouver in the history of fiction film, unusually sophisticated in dealing with urban issues as pertinent today as they were in the 1970s. Here we find Madeleine (Nicola Lipman) recently transplanted from Quebec and eager to explore the social experiments for which the west coast metropolis had become famous. It was shot at the peak of the hippie movement fuelled by trans-provincial migration, a time rife with anti-counterculture sentiment when loitering laws were used to bully transient youth on downtown streets. As we follow her journey of self-discovery, Madeleine is prompted to reflect upon the politics of land-use in a city preparing for what would become a 30-year urban design plan that has been lauded the world over while failing to address crucial issues of street poverty. The film thus engages with the realities of Vancouver as an urban

centre on the forefront of questions about the state of North American cities in the last third of the twentieth century. And in tying region-specific themes to extensive location shooting, the film stands apart from typical Vancouver productions that, whether foreign or domestic, tend to be less invested in engaging with the city than in making use of its resources for purely aesthetic or functional purposes.

Madeleine shares her loft in the Downtown Eastside with self-styled radical boyfriend Toro (John Juliani). With the iconic lighted 'W' of the Woodward's complex visible just behind the apartment building, they look out across the Canadian Pacific Rail yard set against the waters of Burrard Inlet and the North Shore mountains. Toro is associated with industry, fascinated by the coupling trains that fuel his sexual desire as he calls Madeleine's attention to their sound outside their bedroom window. But Madeleine is associated with nature, preferring the scenic backdrop and its implied quietude, her own fantasies of a dream boy always set by the water without a hint of civilization. When challenged by Toro on her escapist flights of fancy, Madeleine answers: 'at least my fantasies are innocent,' pointing to his sexual quirks as evidence of corruption by the very system he wants to challenge. Their gender-stereotyped associations reflect utopian accounts of Vancouver's harmony between civilization and the wilderness, but ultimately the film breaks these characterizations down. Toro has been using Madeleine's loft as part of his plan to organize the transient members of Vancouver's young hippie community into a vehicle for systemic change, ultimately seeking to leave the city and start fresh on one of the islands off the coast. Meanwhile Madeleine becomes increasingly entrenched in the street culture of



Above/opposite © 1971 Spring-Glen-Warren

an older generation who are homeless by dint of the city's changing relationship to industry rather than by privileged choice. Toro rejects these older social problems as unsalvageable. While he seeks to escape, Madeleine engages with her new urban home, reversing the relationship between their character psychologies and associated settings.

Madeleine begins to paint portraits of the elderly street people of the Downtown Eastside, an activity requiring active participation by her subjects and ultimately reflected back to the community through a showing at a local gallery. This reciprocal approach to documentation positions art as a mode of community activism, a facet of Hastings Street life that continues today. Although

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the gentrification of surrounding areas has concentrated social problems in the DTES, not all artist collectives have followed the trend of evacuating the area for safer and more profitable neighbourhoods. The recent re-development of the Woodward's block, incorporating Simon Fraser University's School for Contemporary Art, is set

to increase cultural activity: for some a remedy for the DTES's decline; for others the feared herald of gentrification. In Woodward's atrium hangs Stan Douglas's mural *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971* (2008), a critique of the violent police break-up of a counter-culture protest that occurred months after *Madeleine Is ...* was released. The film thus illustrates the importance of activist art to the area while foreshadowing the dispersal of hippie life that once challenged city by-laws to other neighbourhoods, and ultimately to the rural islands and interior.

The film charts Madeleine's shifting positions by way of strategic location shooting. There is a wealth of sequences shot downtown, treated with different stylistic approaches to capture a range of tonal qualities including: the calm of a morning yoga session across from the train yard; the bustle of a heavily trafficked commute to work; a free-jazz sprint through the neon night following a fight with Toro; a psychedelic meditation on the city's imposing architecture prior to a dream-therapy session; and a melancholy tour of the street life in sepia-toned stills as Madeleine begins her documentation project. As such the downtown core is presented as a heterogeneous space resisting easy categorization when set against the interstitial spaces of the beach or the remove of the Gulf Islands.

But perhaps the most significant location is the West End condo high-rise occupied by David (Wayne Specht), the corporate suit Madeleine befriends as the boy from her fantasies. David is emblematic of the rising professional class that would go on to claim the gentrified views of Vancouver's classic mountain backdrop in high-rises like these, increasingly encroaching upon the scenery for all those removed from the waterfront. But the film refuses essentialism, and it is David, not Toro, who recognizes Madeleine's talent for capturing the essence of downtown street life in her painting. While Madeleine doesn't end up choosing either man as partner, the film is provocative in allowing for David to be a positive influence in Madeleine's life, keeping any strict lines from being drawn between the various conflicting worlds that intersect in the film. It is this willingness to acknowledge overlapping claims to the city's spaces that speaks most to Madeleine's character, the film's title leaving her self-definition open to situation-specific fluctuation that could just as easily be applied to the city itself. Vancouver is ... ✦

