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*Harold and Maude: Sickeningly funny or just plain sickening?*

Since its 1971 debut in theaters, the ever-unique *Harold and Maude* with its charmingly disconcerting humor has earned its title of “American Cult Classic”, regularly screened in theaters across United States well after the era of its creation. However, this praise was not always associated with Ashby’s film, in fact *Harold and Maude* was held in quite an opposite regard. Upon its release in 1971, *Harold and Maude* was greeted with a slew of outrageously and often aggressively negative reviews. A flop in the box office and a favored target of hatred for film critics, *Harold and Maude* was cast off as a disturbing and twisted love story between a suicidal teenager and a hideously old flower child, the film itself doused in the glorification of death and self-harm. The strongly juxtaposing initial critical reception and current standing of *Harold and Maude* not only speaks to the film’s daring nature in the name of social commentary, but also reveals a darker, blinded, and more conservative undertone of the so-called “free spirited” New Hollywood Film era. What’s more is the film’s eventual rise to the status of “cult classic” following its initial backlash along with Ashby’s refusal to accept the title of “auteur” places the film in second phase of “New Hollywood Film”, an eventual blockbuster mega success, clearly not an individualized product of Ashby’s sole creative genius.

Perhaps one of the most glaringly obvious themes present throughout *Harold and Maude* is that of death, particularly Harold’s obsession with his own suicide. The film reinforces this theme by book ends itself with two of Harold’s fake suicide attempts, a hanging and a dramatic car ride off of a cliff. Though Harold’s obsession with death was intended as a sardonic, satirical, and oddly enduring trait, critical reception of Harold’s character yielded a very different reaction.

In his 1972 review of the film, *Chicago Times* critic Roger Ebert, who describes Harold as a boy with obvious “problems”, seems rather unenthused by the casual treatment of suicide within the film. Ebert recounts the list of suicide stunts, “There's immolation, hanging, whacking off his arm with a meat cleaver, driving his car over a cliff, drowning, and if I missed one, never mind. But his mother is merely annoyed” (Ebert, 2). The key word here is *merely*. Throughout the film, Harold's mother, Mrs. Chasen, is never horrified, or even surprised by Harold's antics, in fact she never passes the threshold of being “annoyed”. This seemed to be a point of contention for Ebert along with many other critics who were taken aback by such blasé treatment of death. This nonchalant treatment of morbidity is only emphasized by the rather gory and elaborate depictions of suicides staged by Harold and listed above by Ebert. The Independent Film Journal (IFJ) agrees with Ebert's sentiments, commenting that the film's cynical humor missed its mark, Ashby and writer Higgin's “manipulations” being “far too crude and observable” (IFJ, 18). This opinion is echoed in *Variety* magazine, the creators' cryptic humor being described as “sophomoric”, “overdone”, and “mocking” (Murf, 22).

In the wake of the Vietnam war, this adverse reaction to the comical treatment of death is one that can be well understood. The film even goes so far as to mock the war itself through the character of Harold's hilariously intense, war hungry uncle. This unseemly portrayal along with the thousands of American lives being lost to the war daily created a rather hostile environment for a film which seems to brush the severity of these deaths aside. However, while this anger on the part of film critics is acceptable in the context of the war, it is also this context that blinds them to the true purpose of such a dark humor. Harold's character is so ridiculously careless with his life, to the point of humor, that when he meets Maude, someone who truly loves and sees the beauty in the privilege to live, the stark contrast emphasizes the precious nature of being alive.

His outrageous suicide attempts are meant to be so shocking that when Maude is introduced, it completely obvious how little Harold respects life.

Most importantly, it is vital that Harold start from such a deeply dark place in order for the audience to see the change he undergoes as Maude shows him the true value of life he was once unable to see- a message that is meant for viewers as well. As an audience, we are meant to grow with Harold. The comedic undertones of his suicidal tendency not only allow for a strong juxtaposition between his character and that of Maude's, but make his character acceptable, likable, and almost relatable allowing the audience to connect, allowing for this mutual growth to occur alongside Harold as he learns from Maude.

Another obvious point of criticism received was the film's portrayal of an unconventional relationship between a 79-year-old woman and a 20-year-old young man. In reference to the relationship between Harold and Maude, the *New York Times* (NYT) writes that the film will call for "...more Tums than handkerchiefs", suggesting that the love affair may provoke an unsavory physical reaction among viewers (NYT, 47). In *Variety* magazine, critics describe Maude as "an offensive eccentric" whose relationship with Harold is of a "gross and macabre manner" (Murf, 22). In looking at these reviews, it is surprising to consider that the "grotesque" nature of a relationship between a young man and older woman would overshadow more serious and well thought out themes of the film. The relationship is admittedly unconventional; however, one cannot help but see the irony in the lack of acceptance or even slight consideration experienced by these critics in an era of film that claims to be unrestricted and open minded. Additionally, it is difficult not to wonder that had the genders of the characters been reversed, the older half of the relationship being male, would the reaction have been as strong? Critically acclaimed films of the same era which display couples with age gaps such as *American Graffiti* (Bob Falfa and

Carol Morrison) and *Badlands* (Holly and Kit), while the age difference is not as drastic but still enough to be disturbing, provide evidence that the reactions to Harold and Maude may have been partly based in the gender of the Maude's character.

In considering the sexism and close-minded nature of those who criticized *Harold and Maude* it becomes obvious that perhaps the New Hollywood Film era was not the cinematic renaissance of progressivism it claimed to be. In fact, the strong efforts of film critics to shove the film's characters into the limiting bounds of social standards shows a strong similarity to the efforts of Harold's mother to confine him to what society says he should look like, act like, and accomplish (a conventional heterosexual marriage). It is clear that while in some respects these critics may comply with a free-spirited ideology, when it comes to anything too "out of the box", acceptance quickly flies out of the window.

The final point of criticism I will touch upon is the critique of range of genre in the Independent Film Journal review *Harold and Maude*. The journal writes that "Writer Colin Higgins and Director Hal Ashby have tried to have their cake and eat it too... Higgins and Ashby never seek any artistic unity of the material but rather they attempt to be first, scathing, satirists of the highest order and then, wanting the audience to still love them, sentimentalists" (IFJ, 18). In short, the journal does not believe that Higgins nor Ashby have the creative talent to marry the variety of diverse genres and topic within the film. This criticism is one that is, again, blinded by the sense of discomfort provoked by the film. While the range of oscillating genres (tragedy, comedy, melodrama, etc.) may feel uncomfortable and slightly difficult for an audience to digest, this feeling is the entire point of such oscillation. *Harold and Maude*, at its core, is a commentary on the nature of life, precious, fleeting, and every changing. The range of genres emulates the range of experiences and emotions one experiences throughout a lifetime, laughing at one

moment and then crying at the next. This simulation of life's unpredictability and ever-moving nature is precisely what makes the film so powerful- it provides the discomfort and joy that is so unique to the experience of living.

While the film was nothing short of hated by critics, *Harold and Maude* “found success among a much younger and more accepting audience. In the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* “*Stage and Screen*”, George Anderson tells the story of the rebirth of Ashby's film. According to Anderson, Paramount was ready to throw the film to “television scraps” when Minneapolis entered the scene. Anderson writes, “The Westgate Theatre felt the film was too good not to give it a second shot, so “Harold and Maude” was brought back in a second “first-run- ” engagement which began March 22, 1972” (Anderson, 12). The film saw two more successful openings at the Studio 4 Theatre (Aug. 30, 1972) and later the Guild Theater. *Harold and Maude*'s resurgence did not stop there. The film was played for over 2 years in Montreal in Paris and in a single theater in Minneapolis and in 2010, *The Guardian* named it one of the best romantic films of all time. It is this late onset success that perhaps moves *Harold and Maude* into the latter half of the New Hollywood film era, characterized by mega hits and cult classics like *Jaws* and *The Godfather*. Still worshiped today, *Harold and Maude* has stood the test of time, earning its place among these incredibly famous franchises of cinema.

The categorization of *Harold and Maude* as fitting into the second phase of New Hollywood Film is only strengthened by Ashby's refusal to define himself as an “auteur”. Ashby's films prior to *Harold and Maude* all quite different in style and nature, so much so that it is nearly impossible to identify Ashby with a singular auteur trademark and vision. In fact, as Phillip Drake writes in his chapter *Becoming Hal Ashby: The Intersectional Politics, The Hollywood Renaissance, and Harold and Maude*, “Ashby's films confused auteur critics of the

period, with no obvious constant theme, style, genre or setting, and ranging widely from dark comedies to war films, buddy movies to biopics” (Drake, 165). Beyond this, Ashby rejected the soloist nature of the auteur stating that “The great thing about film is, it really is communal. It really is the communal art, and you don’t lose anything—all you do is gain. Your film just gains and gains. The more input you get, the better it is.” (Drake, 165). Considering Ashby’s rejection of auteurism and lack of similarity between his films, it becomes overwhelmingly clear that “Harold and Maude” is in fact a member of New Hollywood Cinemas second phase.

*Harold and Maude* is one of the most controversial and debate films to emerge from the New Hollywood film era. Through his use of highly dark comedy, wildly contrasting characters, and a range of genre, Ashby accomplishes the impressive feat of emulating the feeling of living a life. Although it may have cost the film its initial critical acclaim, Ashby’s willingness to shamelessly make audience members uncomfortable in the name of social commentary makes for an impactful film which beautifully displays the diversity of emotion and absolute preciousness of life. When we peel back the layers of absurdity, as an audience, we are left with a newfound appreciation for the world around us and a new perspective on what it means to be alive. As best described by George Anderson, *Harold and Maude* is a film “Seen by few but loved by all” that is “sure to capture the hearts of all theatregoers.”

#### *Works Cited*

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