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## Chapter 10

### BECOMING HAL ASHBY: INTERSECTIONAL POLITICS, THE 'HOLLYWOOD RENAISSANCE' AND *HAROLD AND MAUDE* (1971)

*Philip Drake*

As a number of writers have outlined, the late 1960s and early 1970s were a period that saw the rise of the director as a recognized auteur within industry and critical discourse, and the creation of a Hollywood cinema seeking not only aesthetic but political credibility, whilst gradually re-establishing its commerciality.<sup>1</sup> The period saw the end of the Production Code and its replacement in 1968 with a ratings system that permitted – subject to rating – swearing, nudity and extra-marital sex to be shown on screen, as well as the explicit treatment of controversial topics. These shifts, bringing new aesthetic and thematic paradigms, can be seen as part of renewed claims to cultural and political legitimacy on the part of the industry, as well as a response to the restructuring and changing ownership of the film studios, and reconfiguration of cinemas towards a youth audience. Such shifts in social views and the influence of 1960s counterculture movements found their expression both in the re-evaluation of established critical canons and in an interest in new forms of filmmaking and film criticism. By the end of the 1960s both filmmaker and critic occupied new cultural ground, with films (and music) critically celebrated as articulating the American experience in new, sometimes profound, ways, and a body of films seen as epitomizing a 'Hollywood Renaissance'.

Such changes were taking place against (and reacting to) a backdrop of significant social change and upheaval in the 1960s. Complex and multifaceted, these included disparate but often connected social movements and events such as the historic civil rights marches that led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the so-called Summer of Love of 1967, rock music and the Woodstock and Altamont Festivals of 1969, the related rise of the Hippie and more politicized Yippie movements, anti-war protests against US military action in Vietnam, the use of drugs, and the sexual revolution in part enabled by the availability of birth control methods, finally legalized for unmarried couples in 1972. The

assassination of Democrat US President John F. Kennedy in 1963, disillusionment with his successor Lyndon B. Johnson, and his replacement in 1969 by the eventually discredited Republican Richard Nixon, all provide an important political backdrop to films of the period, along with reverberations from the assassinations of both civil rights campaigner Martin Luther King, Jr and Senator and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy in 1968.

Industrial changes were also significant in this period. The acquisition of Paramount Pictures in 1966 by Charles Bluhdorn's Gulf + Western, and the hiring of producer Robert Evans as Paramount's Head of Production, alongside industry journalist Peter Bart, signalled a significant departure from the old order represented by moguls such as Adolph Zukor. A string of commercial and critical successes under Evans and Bart, which included Hollywood Renaissance films such as *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), seemed, by the mid-1970s, to have demonstrated that the risk in working with unproven talent had been vindicated. Similarly, United Artists' 1967 purchase by Transamerica Corporation consolidated their earlier strategy of working with independent production companies and producers to garner critical success, from which they had won five Best Picture Academy Awards during the 1960s, with a further six Best Picture nominations. Independent producers such as The Mirisch Brothers, Joseph E. Levine and Stanley Kramer worked closely with the Hollywood studios to co-produce films, many of which transgressed traditional boundaries in their treatment of social issues.

Whilst writers on the Hollywood Renaissance commonly give credit to 1967's *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols) and *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn) as pivotal films that marked a shift to a new kind of Hollywood cinema, the same year also yielded ground-breaking films such as Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* and Norman Jewison's *In The Heat of the Night*, the latter topping that year's list of Academy Awards, and both starring black actor Sidney Poitier in films dealing explicitly with interracial relationships. The exclusion of the latter films from consideration from the critical canon of the Hollywood Renaissance, and their frequent dismissal as 'social conscience films', raises key questions around film historiography, and processes of inclusion in, and exclusion from, canonical works and movements.

During the 1960s, editor Hal Ashby had built up an impressive track record, editing five of the films directed by Norman Jewison and winning an Academy Award as editor for *In The Heat of the Night*. Unlike the 1960s film-school graduates that made up a proportion of the Hollywood Renaissance directors, Ashby – like other directors including Arthur Penn, Robert Altman, Mike Nichols and Roman Polanski – had already spent many years building experience in the industry. He was born in 1929 and trained and served time both in the classical Hollywood studio system, working as an editor with directors including William Wyler and George Stevens, and outside Hollywood (and the United States) with directors such as Tony Richardson and Norman

Jewison. By the time of his directorial debut, *The Landlord* (1970), Ashby was over forty and had already amassed a lengthy list of credits. Over the next decade, Ashby went on to become one of the most commercially and critically successful Hollywood film directors of the 1970s. Yet until recently, Ashby's films have received scant scholarly attention. He remains one of the least conspicuous of the cluster of filmmakers associated with the period, a neglect partly due to his premature death in 1988 and partly due to his problematic fit with the discourse of the Hollywood Renaissance.

As I noted in an earlier work,<sup>2</sup> pioneering studies of the Hollywood Renaissance such as Robin Wood's *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* and Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner's *Camera Politica* barely give Ashby a mention,<sup>3</sup> and in his *Biographical Dictionary of Film*, David Thomson witheringly called Ashby 'a sad casualty who depended on strong collaborators.'<sup>4</sup> Diane Jacobs' early book *Hollywood Renaissance* is an exception to this,<sup>5</sup> although other scholars did not develop her treatment of Ashby until thirty years after its publication.

Critical interest, such as it is, has also focused primarily on six of Ashby's first seven feature films made in the 1970s: *Harold and Maude* (1971), *The Last Detail* (1973), *Shampoo* (1976), *Bound for Glory* (1977), *Coming Home* (1978) and *Being There* (1979). In Peter Biskind's popular and influential book *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* Ashby is positioned as an outsider, a maverick who lost his father when young to suicide, and in turn became a father figure to younger 'movie-brat' filmmakers, and nurtured the talent in others.<sup>6</sup> Ashby appears throughout Biskind's account as a symbol of idealistic, sometimes uncompromising and conflicting countercultural values, married and divorced twice before the age of twenty-one, at the same time both a gentle hippie and intransigent idealist, a talented filmmaker who fell out with the studios, eventually suffering damage to his reputation from which he did not recover before his premature death, aged just fifty-nine.

Ashby's career, his films and his approach to direction therefore make it difficult for critics to locate him within an auteur mode of filmmaking, and auteur was indeed a label Ashby himself rejected. As revealed in interviews at the time, Ashby refused to take sole credit for the production of his films. In one interview he stated: '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.'<sup>7</sup> 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. Ashby's films are varied, collaborative and too whimsical and quirky in tone to easily fit the narrative of male anti-heroes that structures dominant histories of the Hollywood Renaissance. Furthermore, the various legal battles and disputes with producers and studios over creative control across Ashby's career resulted in his final three projects being taken out of his hands prior to completion, further tarnishing his reputation as an auteur.<sup>8</sup>

My earlier research on Ashby explored issues of creative control and conflict at this later point of his career, and in this I argued for the need to consider the competing discourses around contractual texts and creative control. This drew on revisionist archival history, informed by New Cinema History scholarly approaches.<sup>9</sup> Such research attempts to reconstruct history through a reconsideration of historical contexts, production, distribution and exhibition histories and accounts of film reception.

When I first viewed Ashby's archive at the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences scarcely over a decade ago, there was a paucity of published academic work on the filmmaker, a surprise considering he had directed so many critically acclaimed American films of the 1970s. Since then a modest number of academic articles and books have explored his work, sometimes using materials from the archive, including Nick Dawson's biography and useful collection of interviews,<sup>10</sup> Christopher Beach's analysis of his films<sup>11</sup> and Aaron Hunter's recent book which explores claims of authorship around Ashby's films, drawing on the work on C. Paul Sellors to examine how Ashby's practice can function as a critique of dominant conceptualizations of authorship.<sup>12</sup> Hunter argues that 'Ashby, by rejecting the auteur mantel [sic], effectively both barred himself from attaining any significant power during the era and marginalized himself within scholarly consideration of the era [...] [however] his own role in authoring the films can still be detected.'<sup>13</sup>

For Hunter, Ashby's lack of visibility in scholarship on the Hollywood Renaissance is part of the problematic myth of the Hollywood auteur. In his analysis, he offers details of Ashby's multiple collaborations with writers, editors, producers and musicians, arguing that Ashby epitomized collaborative authorship, working repeatedly and collaboratively with a range of notable creative talent (for instance renowned cinematographers Gordon Willis and Haskell Wexler). Hunter's study, however, is also concerned with historical recuperation. Whilst not wishing to reclaim Ashby as an auteur, Hunter is nonetheless convinced of his important place in American film history. Similarly, Dawson's biography of Ashby presents a biographical narrative from his traumatic early life in Ogden, Utah to his battle with cancer and early death, creating a narrative of pathos, whilst arguing for Ashby's place in cinema history.

I wish here to avoid either a biographical account of Ashby, or a consideration of his work through the lens of auteur theory. As I discussed in my earlier work, Ashby's frequent fights with studio executives over creative control – a trend that occurred throughout his career – raises important questions over an 'auteurist' reading of his films. Incidents from his later work, such as when he was fired from the production of *8 Million Ways to Die* (1986) or when *Looking to Get Out* (1982) was re-edited for release, demonstrate the contingency of creative control (and therefore authorship), and the reputational damage that such battles exacted.

In my approach, I draw on John Caughie's useful essay on the value of authorship as a discursive formation.<sup>14</sup> Caughie argues that using the concept of 'director-centred criticism' helps to avoid the pitfalls of auteur theory, in particular the intentional fallacy that it promotes. I also prefer to adopt a 'director-centred criticism' perspective in this chapter, given that such an approach understands authorship as a *performative* function of both critical and industry discourse, playing a significant role in reifying what are complex industrial and collaborative processes. In the rest of this chapter I wish to explore a number of aspects of Hal Ashby's early films, focusing primarily on *Harold and Maude*, in order to consider his relationship to the so-called Hollywood Renaissance, suggesting that the reasons his films fit awkwardly with dominant historical accounts not only demonstrate a gap in studies of the period but, perhaps more importantly, question the progressive political basis on which a 'renaissance' can be claimed.

I also need to present a point of clarification: by referring to 'Ashby's films' I do not claim that Ashby was the sole author, nor indeed does this necessarily indicate that he was the most significant individual in terms of creative input. Indeed, as my earlier work makes clear, the contingency of creative control, the importance of collaborators, the relative power of the personnel involved and the contracts that they negotiate, all place limits on authorship. As I will argue, Ashby's early films, including *Harold and Maude*, stylistically, tonally and politically challenge what has become a hegemonic discourse of the Hollywood Renaissance, with its tendency to privilege narratives of white male narcissism, consigning other kinds of films to be forgotten. The films that I discuss here are not unique in this, as the lack of significant accounts of marginalized black and women filmmakers of the period also attests (see also Chapter 11 in this volume). Looking at Ashby's early films, I shall argue that they are linked by a strong humanist connection to social issues, often questioning inequalities of race and ethnicity, class and age, and provoking – through the use of humour and satire – acute observations about social divisions, inequality and the place of individualism within a society requiring conformism.

### *Intersectional politics and the Hollywood Renaissance*

In 1989, law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote a short but highly influential article on 'intersectionality'.<sup>15</sup> From a legal perspective, the concept describes intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination or discrimination. Crenshaw was particularly concerned with intersections of race and gender; however, scholars have deployed the concept for different kinds of multidimensional analysis of overlapping social categories. In considering the inequalities faced by black women, cultural theorist Angela Davis has argued that we need to develop a more complex understanding of how class intersects with gender and race.<sup>16</sup> Such intersectional issues of gender, class, race and age

are often explored and performed in Ashby's early films. Before looking in detail at Ashby's second film as director, *Harold and Maude*, with its intergenerational love story, I will turn to Ashby's first, often overlooked film as director, *The Landlord*, a film that can be seen as significant in its approach to political issues and collaborative filmmaking.

*The Landlord*, produced by The Mirisch Company and released by United Artists, was based on a 1966 novel by black female author Kristin Hunter, adapted by black American writer/director Bill Gunn. It was made just a year after Dr Martin Luther King's assassination, and following the Civil Rights Act of 1968 that outlawed discrimination in housing, expanding on the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act. *The Landlord* offers an early and prescient examination of gentrification, race and class, with a narrative focused on inner-city gentrification in Park Slope, Brooklyn and the displacement of black Americans, and presenting a commentary on white privilege, liberalism and interracial relationships. As Academy Award winning editor of *In the Heat of the Night*, a multi-award-winning film that explored race relations, Ashby had previously worked closely with Norman Jewison, editing five of his films. Jewison offered to produce *The Landlord* with Ashby directing, securing a sizeable \$2 million budget from the Mirisch Company (although the film eventually went \$450,000 over budget).<sup>17</sup> Mirisch had also produced *In the Heat of the Night* and although the company had concerns about Ashby's status as a first-time director, they were convinced when Jewison offered to produce the film.

The plot of the film is straightforward: Elgar Enders (Beau Bridges) is a 29-year-old white man who decides to leave his parents' home, and buys a tenanted apartment building in the black ghetto of Park Slope, Brooklyn. He plans to evict all the occupants and construct a luxury home for himself. However, once he ventures into the building, he meets the low-income black residents (including Pearl Bailey as Marge) who dwell there, and likes them, repairing the building but also, rebelling against his family's wishes, becoming romantically linked to two black women, one of whom is mixed-race and sometimes also passes as white. As a satire on inequality, the film presents an aesthetic that is at times almost documentary in feel, yet this is offset by quirky comedic performances and an offbeat use of style, editing and use of sound. The scene where Elgar announces 'I think I love a girl who is a negro' is followed by his mother's reaction and a brief momentary cutaway to an African village, in order to underline her prejudice, yet also her attempts to appear liberal-minded, commenting, when taken to task by him on her attitudes to black people, 'Didn't we all go together to see *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*'

Throughout *The Landlord* formal and stylistic experimentation mixes with black comedy and social satire. A party scene with Elgar and his black tenants provides perhaps the most powerful social commentary when a character exclaims: 'You whiteys scream about miscegenation, and you done watered down every race you ever hated!' The irony of the scene – Elgar is in a relationship with a black woman when he also sleeps with another (one of the

tenants) – and its biting commentary on gentrification, demonstrate the intersectional politics at play, allowing cross-cutting issues of class, gender and race to be explored throughout the film. The film's deployment of offbeat humour frequently offers an acute and important, but not didactic, commentary about inclusive and communal social values.

Despite dealing with significant social issues of the time, *The Landlord* was not a box-office success. It grossed approximately \$1.5 million, proving a disappointment against its almost \$2.5 million production budget.<sup>18</sup> Reviews of the film were generally positive, although the film's marketing was mishandled by United Artists who attempted to advertise the title as a sex comedy with the tagline 'Watch the Landlord Get His', and – on the poster – a picture of a finger pointing towards two doorbells designed to look like female breasts. Nonetheless the lack of attention given to the film since its release and its absence from most discussions of the period raises questions about how film history can also contribute to an erasure of consideration of intersectional politics. Seen now, the film offers a strong critique of gentrification and a complex exploration of intersectional issues of the period.

I now turn to consider Ashby's 1971 second directorial feature, *Harold and Maude*, an intergenerational black comedy. As I will argue, this film exemplifies an approach to filmmaking that foregrounds questions of intersectional politics and deploys an eclectic style, mixing different emotional tones and registers, provoking questions around conformism, class and age. Yet despite its ostensibly radical premise, the film sits uneasily within the Hollywood Renaissance canon and contributed to Ashby's marginalization in studies of the cinema of the period. However, as I also demonstrate, *Harold and Maude* eventually acquired a strong cult film status that helped it become canonized retrospectively, further complicating questions of authorship and the extent to which such frames adequately determine our understanding of film history.

### *The cult intersectional politics of Harold and Maude*

Just as with the contentious representation of miscegenation in *The Landlord*, the characters Harold and Maude, played by Bud Cort and Ruth Gordon respectively, tackle the potentially taboo subject of a romantic and sexual relationship between a 19-year-old man and a 79-year-old woman. In addition, the film includes the staging of Harold's fake suicides and Maude's eccentricity, exuberance and non-conformity. It was made for Paramount, after Peter Bart and Robert Evans championed it. Budgeted for \$1.285 million – a more realistic target to recoup compared to his previous film – the costs of *Harold and Maude* also went over budget. In particular, the addition of fourteen extra weeks for editing raised costs to just over \$1.6 million, \$315,000 over the original budget when finalized in October 1971, causing Ashby some difficulties with Evans.<sup>19</sup> A deal memo dated 26 May 1970 summarized the original finances, with



Paramount paying \$100,000 for the screenplay by Colin Higgins plus his services as screenwriter, and bringing in Howard Jaffe and Mildred Lewis as co-producers, eventually adding – at Ashby’s request – Charles Mulvehill, formerly Head of Production at Mirisch, as an additional producer.

Initially down to direct, recent UCLA graduate Higgins was given an advance of \$7,500 to shoot three scenes. That footage, however, was deemed unsatisfactory by the studio, which nonetheless gave him a co-producer credit and net profit participation contract.<sup>20</sup> Both the producing team and the director, then, were relatively inexperienced and without a major hit, demonstrating Evans and Bart’s willingness to take a risk on, at this point, relatively unproven talent.

As with *The Landlord*, Ashby did not find working on the film easy. In an emotional letter to Evans, dated 1 December 1970, Ashby expresses his frustration, threatening to quit the film: ‘it seems that Paramount has either disappointed or failed me just once too often, and the stress of my coping with the whole damn thing has indeed taken its toll.’<sup>21</sup> In the letter Ashby details the studio’s interference, which included preventing him from hiring Gordon Willis as his preferred director of photography (who, due to the studio’s delay, had committed to filming *The Godfather*), and its quibbling over the budget and locations. Nonetheless Ashby did continue directing the film, albeit with a number of disagreements with the studio over various areas, as I detail below.

The film is focused on Harold, a wealthy 19-year-old man obsessed with death, who stages his own fake suicides and who drives a hearse, and Maude, a 79-year-old eccentric woman who meets Harold through their shared hobby of attending the funerals of strangers. During carefully staged ‘suicides’ in front of his mother (Vivian Pickles), we learn that, rather than communicate or understand him, she aims to find him a wife or get him to join the military. Maude befriends Harold through her eccentric hobbies, including taking trees from the streets and returning them to nature, and an infectiously rebellious yet positive attitude to life. The characters spend time together, opening up to each other about life issues, and growing close.

Much of the comedy of the film comes from the warmth of their relationship – Maude’s vivaciousness and love of life slowly brings out Harold’s own joy, and they become lovers despite their large age difference. Having announced they will marry, to the consternation and disgust of Harold’s mother, his psychiatrist and his priest, Harold prepares a celebration for Maude’s 80th birthday, only then learning she had decided to end her life that day. Taken to multiple hospitals after a deliberate overdose, Maude dies. In the final sequence, we see Harold’s car – a sports-car converted into hearse – plunging off a cliff, but after the crash the film reveals Harold standing at the top, playing on his banjo – a gift from Maude – the affirmative song she taught him: Cat Stevens’ ‘If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out’.

As should be clear from the description above, the film is highly quirky in its use of black humour and comedy, and bold in its depiction of an intergenerational

romantic relationship between a young man and an elderly woman. The mix of tones in the film is unusual, with Harold's morbid staging of convincing suicides contrasting with the exuberant escapades of Maude. The humour in flouting the authority of various institutional figures (notably the police and military) makes them appear ridiculous and diminished, and the eccentricity of Maude's world – living in a quirky railway carriage – offers a stark contrast to the muted brown palette of Harold's wealthy family home.

It is significant that it is Maude, a 79-year-old woman, who epitomizes the anti-authoritarian free spirit of the film, rather than the young male protagonist. Maude also recalls her early life, alluding to her time in Vienna, thinking she would marry a soldier, before a later scene reveals a number tattooed on her arm, confirming her as a survivor of the Holocaust, bringing a darker element to what was a romantic scene. Such switching between pathos, introspection and comedy is quirky and unusual, and often signalled through stylistic markers, for instance in the different colour palettes of the two homes, the use of short cutaway shots, the montage sequences and use of Cat Stevens' songs to narrate the moods of the characters. One of the trailers for the film offers a number of scenes cut from the final version that highlight further the film's concern with intersectional politics, for instance, a scene at the Emeryville mudflats where driftwood letters spell out 'Fuck War', as well as the trailer's unambiguous 'Harold And Maude Say: Get Together Regardless of Your Age, Race, Creed, Color or National Origin' message.

The scene where Harold and Maude, after a day together, decide to consummate their relationship is an example of both creative compromise and invention – remarkable as according to accounts of the film's production, Ashby was asked by Robert Evans to remove the sex scene.<sup>22</sup> With Paramount having



**Figure 10.1** Taboo breaking and intergenerational sex. Copyright Paramount.

insisted that the sex itself must be unseen, the film instead shows Harold and Maude lying in bed with Maude still sleeping and Harold lying next to her (see Figure 10.1). Intercut with fireworks, Harold smiles and blows bubbles whilst the Cat Stevens' song 'I Can See the Light' starts to play.

Despite the absence of the depiction of sex, the level of intimacy between the two characters was (and remains) taboo breaking in its presentation of intergenerational relationships. The film acknowledges this by following the scene with direct addresses straight to camera by three characters who express their disgust: Harold's Uncle Victor (a military General), Harold's psychiatrist and a priest who – during a slow zoom in on his face – grotesquely contorts his face to express to the camera his revulsion: 'The thought of your young body co-mingling with the withered flesh, sagging breasts and flabby buttocks makes me want to vomit.' Each of the characters has behind them a reinforcing authority figure in a picture frame in their office: for the General, President Richard Nixon (whom he salutes with his mechanical arm), for the psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud and, for the priest, a religious authority figure (See Figures 10.2a–c). The breaking of the fourth wall through direct address in this way is highly unusual in Hollywood cinema (although the opening scene of *The Landlord* features a similar direct address to camera) and brings the spectator into the narrative through this mode of the actor's performance. The zoom in on the priest during his monologue in particular, emphasizes, through the use of heightened, caricatured performance, the grotesque nature of imposing such moralizing judgements on the two protagonists. Hence the film asserts an intersectional critique of social conventions of age and gender through its clear ridiculing of these representatives of moral authority.



(a)



(b)



(c)

**Figures 10.2a–c** *Harold and Maude's* caricatured figures of moral authority. Copyright Paramount.

The politics of the film also appeal to countercultural values, particularly those of a youth audience, through forms of comedic knowingness. The realistic nature of the suicide scenes is juxtaposed with their comedic inventiveness: self-immolation, committing hara-kiri, Harold chopping off his hand: all witnessed impassively by his mother and shocking various visitors. The scene where Harold, having scared off another suitor organized by his mother, turns



**Figure 10.3** Harold looks at the camera. Copyright Paramount.

and briefly looks directly at the camera is evidence of this – Harold deliberately breaks the fourth wall to acknowledge the audience, a Brechtian device that brings an intertextual knowingness to the scene, momentarily disrupting the realist narrative frame to point out the absurdity of the situation (see Figure 10.3).

Released by Paramount just before Christmas 1971, *Harold and Maude*'s critical reception was mixed; whilst it garnered many positive reviews some were vitriolic. *Variety*'s review notoriously stated '*Harold and Maude* has all the fun and gaiety of a burning orphanage. Ruth Gordon heads the cast as an offensive eccentric who becomes a beacon in the life of a self-destructive rich boy, played by Bud Cort. Together they attend funerals and indulge in specious philosophizing.'<sup>23</sup> *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby's review stated that Ruth Gordon and Bud Cort's performances were 'so aggressive, so creepy and off-putting that Harold and Maude [were] obviously made for each other' and that 'Mr. Cort's baby face and teenage build look grotesque alongside Miss Gordon's tiny, weazened frame.'<sup>24</sup> In essence, such critiques mirrored the moral authority characters I have just described within the film, with reviewers clearly uncomfortable with its radical take on intergenerational relationships.

Despite their concern over the consummation scene, Robert Evans and Peter Bart at Paramount had not expected such a negative critical reaction. Before the film's release, audience previews were carried out that recorded scores of 177 for 'excellent', 112 for 'good', 23 for 'fair' and 13 for 'poor'.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the publicity department at Paramount planned a number of elaborate campaigns that underlined the quirky intergenerational politics of the film. Alongside interviews given by the stars and director, the studio's plan – perhaps not entirely grasping the social critique of conformism in the film – included

potential promotional ideas such as creating ice sculptures in local parks, local flower show tie-ins, radio/television show discussions on the theme of ‘You needn’t grow old’, and a local newspaper essay contest on the most humorous reply to ‘How I Stay Young’, as well as activities such as senior citizens arts festivals and local tree plantings. In their plan they also noted that ‘generally the off-beat nature of the property has the college and undergrounds anxious to see the film.’<sup>26</sup>

Cynthia Baron and Mark Bernard present an interesting analysis of *Harold and Maude* in relation to the politics of age and gender.<sup>27</sup> Noting that the film is an anomaly in the casting of an elderly female actor as a lead, they suggest that the era’s new permissiveness, whilst allowing such representations, generally tended to rely on ‘sex-goddesses expanding the moral boundaries art and exploitation cinema could cross.’<sup>28</sup> They argue, drawing on Robert Sklar,<sup>29</sup> that the critic Manny Farber was significant in the film’s eventual success, stating that ‘his essays led a younger generation of cult connoisseurs to prize Gordon’s performance in *Harold and Maude*.’<sup>30</sup> Quoting Sklar, who argues that Farber advocated a ‘resistant cult taste for more obscure and less clearly commodified cultural objects,’<sup>31</sup> Baron and Bernard’s article notes, for instance, that on 19 May 1972 the *Daily Journal* in Fergus Falls, Minnesota urged readers to see the film.<sup>32</sup> Yet the film only gradually built its audience and became a slow-burning cult success after being re-released twice in the cinema during the 1970s. As Danny Peary confirms, the film eventually became a ‘cause célèbre among college-age moviegoers throughout the United States and Canada, breaking longevity records in cities like Detroit, Montreal, and most memorably, Minneapolis, where residents actually picketed the Westgate Theater trying to get the management to replace the picture after a consecutive three-year run.’<sup>33</sup>

This kind of slow-burn success, built on repeated circulation and engagement with a college-age audience, is characteristic of cult films. Many cult films achieved their cultural status through regular and repeated screenings at independent cinemas, often late at night – the so-called ‘midnight movies.’<sup>34</sup> Such films – sometimes shown by student film societies – were often socially transgressive, appealing to a youth audience that was sympathetic to the politics of the counterculture. The intergenerational relationship between Harold and Maude, its rejection of traditional social views and flouting of authority, were all important factors in establishing it as a cult film. In an interview, when asked why the film was a cult success, Ashby commented:

I think it’s probably due to a number of things, the first being the kind of black humor that’s in the film. I also think that a lot of it has to do with what Ruth Gordon says about life and love in the film. That’s the impression I get with the feedback. It’s not that she said such profound things in the film, as it is maybe the way she said them. And the spirit of the film makes people laugh. They have a good time with it.<sup>35</sup>

*Harold and Maude*'s enthusiastic adoption by audiences as a cult film, after its initial box-office failure and mixed critical reception, is interesting in relation to the politics of the Hollywood Renaissance. The 'cultification' of *Harold and Maude* presents a contradiction. Whilst the film certainly breaks taboos, its cultification through the 1970s and 1980s also familiarizes the difficult elements, contains the transgressive politics that shocked at the time, and potentially draws attention away from the film's radical intersectional critique. At the same time, the process of becoming a cult film arguably denies Ashby a place in the auteur pantheon of the Hollywood Renaissance: after all, the meanings of cult films belong as much to their audiences as to their filmmakers. The film – perhaps fitting Ashby's own emphasis on collaborative authorship – becomes less determined or framed by the director's personal vision or signature and more a form of communal experience, a sharing of values with and by an audience. A selection of fan mail – in Ashby's papers – illustrates how the film connected intensely with many of its viewers who wished to defend it against its detractors.<sup>36</sup>

It is impossible to discuss *Harold and Maude*, its intersectional politics and its rise to cult status, without discussing its music by Cat Stevens (now Yusuf Islam). The songs often function intertextually, commenting on the mental or emotional state of the characters, or to make a political point – as, for instance, in the scene where a very long zoom out on a cemetery takes place alongside the song 'Where Do the Children Play?', offering a critique of American militarism.

Two signature songs were especially written by Stevens for the film – 'Don't Be Shy' and 'If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out'. Both songs have a close connection to the content of the film and the two lead characters, commenting on the intersectional nature of their relationship and their eccentricities. The first song accompanies the opening scene. In this scene, Harold (whose face is mainly out of shot), walks slowly down the stairs, then puts a record on; the music is 'Don't Be Shy'. Not only is the song therefore diegetic, it has been chosen by the character to accompany the actions that follow; Harold is 'soundtracking' his own life. The use of the song in this way connects Cat Stevens' music and lyrics directly with the main character's self-expression. The lyrics of the songs work closely with the content of the film, commenting on Harold's character:

Don't be shy, just let your feelings roll on by  
 Don't wear fear or nobody will know you're there  
 Just lift your head, and let your feelings out instead  
 And don't be shy, just let your feelings roll on by.

The other signature song written especially for the film, 'If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out', is similarly 'chosen' by Maude, but more significantly, it is she who sings and performs the song first. This is during Harold's third visit to her home. She performs it somewhat sloppily, singing out of tune, but with

uninhibited joy and brio, encouraging Harold to join in (which he does quietly and shyly). She plays the song in full – her performance is not cut short, condensed or faded out – and as she starts to dance it is comically revealed to have been a pianola, automatically playing the notes, another quirky element that adds to the film's cult appeal. It is significant that the studio-recorded version with Cat Stevens' vocals is not heard until much later in the film, after the song's signature status has already been established for Maude and her connection with Harold. The song lyrics are:

If you want to sing out, sing out.  
Well, if you want to sing out, sing out  
And if you want to be free, be free  
'Cause there's a million things to be

This song in particular became emblematic for the film and its treatment of personal politics, appearing three times, including the closing scene with Harold, and expressing the countercultural 'live free' philosophy espoused by the film as well as an embrace of the intergenerational bond between the two characters. Both songs played a key role in establishing both the film's cult status and its countercultural appeal. Jamie Sexton, in an examination of cult film and music, notes how film soundtracks 'become enhanced within cult communities,'<sup>37</sup> and both the cult status of *Harold and Maude* and the intersectional critique it offers are closely entwined with Cat Stevens' songs.

Oddly, despite the importance of Stevens' songs to the film, a soundtrack of the film was not released until decades later, in spite of his huge success as an artist in the 1970s. Although there was an agreed soundtrack contract between Stevens and the studio, neither song was released until 1984 on any format, contributing to the cult 'rare' nature of the film. The scarcity of the soundtrack songs arguably contributed to the repeated viewing of the film, thus reinforcing its cult status. The cinema was, during the 1970s, the only place where these songs could be heard.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the two songs maintained their scarcity value; even today, despite the film's reputation, there is no readily available soundtrack: an album was released in 2007 only as a special edition of 2,500 copies, becoming an instantly collectable object reselling for over \$600 a copy.<sup>39</sup> Yet the impact of Cat Stevens' songs was not just their place in helping the film acquire cult status, they also position the film's intersectional politics, and its advocacy of free-spirited liberalism: they not only narrate the film, but – as with the actors' performances – reinforce its political message.

Eventually, after multiple re-releases and pioneering the midnight movies exhibition circuit, *Harold and Maude* became not only a cult film but profitable (unlike *The Landlord*). In a memo following an audit of the film's revenues in 1981, the film was recorded to have produced total gross receipts of approximately \$6,000,000.<sup>40</sup> The film's slow edging towards profitability mirrors its gradual acquisition of cultural status, and subsequently the film has been



released on multiple formats, and in 2012 – emblematic of its status in the canon of cinephile films – was granted a Criterion Collection special collectors release.

This shows the limits of the film auteur model; as I have indicated above, the film was collaborative in production. Ashby's insistence on crediting the contributions of the writer Colin Higgins, cinematographer John Alonzo, musician Cat Stevens and main actors, Ruth Gordon and Bud Cort, is at odds with the Hollywood Renaissance emphasis on the director as sole author. Equally, as the fan letters and cultification of the film show, the meanings of the film and its place in a canon also lie in its reception: whilst *Harold and Maude* was not a success on its initial release, in the following decade it built a dedicated audience following and garnered both critical and commercial success. This points to the contingency of film history – where reputations can rise and fall over time – and the need for scholars to provide diachronic, revisionist accounts of the Hollywood Renaissance period.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter I have examined how the early films of Hal Ashby engage with intersectional politics. In *The Landlord*, cultural questions of race, class, gentrification and urban displacement are explored, and in *Harold and Maude* intersectional issues of social alienation, gender and age are placed front and centre. In my analysis, I have suggested that the overall exclusion of Ashby's films from dominant narratives of the Hollywood Renaissance has been due partly to their unusual mix of subjects, variations of tone, quirky aesthetics and hippie sensibility, but partly also due to their engagement with and exploration of intersectional politics and countercultural values. These films explore age, gender and race in ways notably different from those addressed by other Hollywood Renaissance filmmakers of the period. Ashby's early films explore social and political issues through a worldview touched by both radical politics and liberal humanism.

Although his type of authorship did not fit the paradigm of the 'movie-brat', and he rejected the auteur label and emphasized the importance of collaboration, I argue that this does not account fully for Ashby's absence from the majority of histories of the Hollywood Renaissance. The use of comedy in *The Landlord* and *Harold and Maude* does not fit canonical accounts of the Hollywood Renaissance, it troubles them: the films are too odd, too bold and too challenging to fit the dominant narrative. Indeed, the use of comedy in Ashby's early films challenges the tacit rules of the Hollywood Renaissance by avoiding a narcissistic focus on the male anti-hero.<sup>41</sup>

One final question that might be posed is what elevated *Harold and Maude* but not *The Landlord* to cult status? In part, I suggest, it is the anti-authoritarian spirit of the former, with *Harold and Maude* targeting clear authority figures –

the military trying to enlist Harold, the psychiatrist trying to normalize him, the priest offering condemnation – that a college audience can easily align with, or – in Ashby’s earlier words – ‘have a good time with’. In contrast, *The Landlord* offers a more uncomfortable, rather less palatable, truth for audiences: showing that systemic racism and class privilege are intertwined. The elevation of *Harold and Maude* to cult film status, however, also brings potential risks: celebration of the cult object reduces its sense of unfamiliarity, potentially depoliticizing the radical intersectional politics it seeks to explore.

If film history is a process – of remembering, recuperating but also forgetting – then it is also a process of privileging certain forms of knowledge and frames of understanding, over others. Remembering Hal Ashby, and understanding his collaborative filmmaking and humanist vision, questions academic and critical preoccupation with auteur theory and the hegemonic, even reified, narratives of the Hollywood Renaissance. I have argued that such narratives have marginalized or ignored films such as *The Landlord* and *Harold and Maude* that demonstrate important engagements with social issues: of interracial relationships, of age and gender, of social class and the intersectional politics that cut across them. These films present us with an inclusive, life-affirming approach to society and social cohesion, despite their black comedy. In doing so they offer – to revise Robert Kolker’s words – a cinema of humanism and community, rather than of loneliness and isolation.<sup>42</sup>

**Note:** I would like to express my thanks to Nessa Johnston for her insightful comments on the use of music in the films.

### Notes

- 1 For overviews see Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (London: IB Taurus, 2002) and Peter Krämer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005).
- 2 Philip Drake, ‘Reputational Capital, Creative Conflict and Hollywood Independence: The Case of Hal Ashby’, in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, eds Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (London: Routledge, 2012): 40–152.
- 3 Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).
- 4 David Thomson, *A New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, fourth edition (London: Little, Brown, 2002). 34.
- 5 Diane Jacobs, *Hollywood Renaissance* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1977).
- 6 Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-drugs-and Rock ‘n’ Roll Generation Changed Hollywood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).
- 7 Ashby, quoted in Nick Dawson, *Being Hal Ashby: Life of a Hollywood Rebel* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 101.

- 8 Drake, 'Reputational Capital', 138.
- 9 These include Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers (eds), *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (London: Routledge, 2011) and James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper (eds) *The New Film History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), building on the pioneering work of Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985).
- 10 Dawson, *Being Hal Ashby* and Nick Dawson, *Hal Ashby: Interviews*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010).
- 11 Christopher Beach, *The Films of Hal Ashby* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009).
- 12 Hunter, *Authoring Hal Ashby*.
- 13 Hunter, *Authoring Hal Ashby*, 3.
- 14 John Caughie, 'Authors and Auteurs: The uses of Theory', in *The SAGE Handbook of Film Studies*, eds James Donald and Michael Renov, (London: SAGE, 2008), 408–23.
- 15 Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139–67.
- 16 Angela Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Random House, 1981).
- 17 F377 *The Landlord* – budgets, Hal Ashby papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (hereafter MHL AMPAS).
- 18 Dawson, *Being Hal Ashby*, 118.
- 19 F295 *Harold and Maude* – costs, Hal Ashby papers, MHL AMPAS.
- 20 F315 *Harold and Maude* – Lewis-Higgins, Hal Ashby papers, MHL AMPAS.
- 21 F289 *Harold and Maude* – correspondence, Hal Ashby papers, MHL AMPAS.
- 22 Hunter, *Authoring Hal Ashby*, 31.
- 23 'Harold and Maude', *Variety*, 7 December 1971.
- 24 Vincent Canby, 'Harold and Maude', *The New York Times*, 21 December 1971.
- 25 Paramount Production Records – *Harold and Maude*
- 26 Paramount Production Records, *Harold and Maude* – publicity.
- 27 Cynthia Baron and Mark Bernard, 'Cult Connoisseurship and American Female Stars in the Sixties: Valuing a Few Withered Tits in the Midst of a "Mammary Renaissance"', in *Cult Film Stardom: Offbeat Attractions and Processes of Cultification*, eds Kate Egan and Sarah Thomas (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), 259–75.
- 28 Baron and Bernard, 'Cult Connoisseurship', 260.
- 29 Robert Sklar, 'In Memoriam: Manny Farber, 1917–2008', *Cinema Journal*, 48, no. 3 (Spring 2009): 66–9.
- 30 Baron and Bernard, 'Cult Connoisseurship', 261
- 31 Sklar, 'In Memoriam', 15, 16.
- 32 'Everybody's Talking about "Harold and Maude"', *Daily Journal* (Fergus Falls, Minnesota), 19 May 1972, 5.
- 33 Danny Peary, *Cult Movies: The Classics, the Sleepers, the Weird, and the Wonderful* (New York: Dell, 1981), 135.
- 34 Gregory A. Waller, 'Midnight Movies, 1980–1985: A Market Study', in *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*, ed. J. P. Tellotte (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1991), 167–86.

- 35 Ashby quoted in Ralph Appelbaum, 'Positive Thinking: Hal Ashby in an Interview with Ralph Appelbaum,' *Films and Filming*, 24, no. 10 (July 1978), <http://www.halashby.co.uk/page5.html#FILMS AND FILMING>
- 36 F303 *Harold and Maude* – fan mail, Hal Ashby papers, MHL AMPAS. A selection of the fan mail illustrates how the film connected strongly with its audience. One viewer wrote to Ashby, enclosing their letter to the editor of the *Saturday Weekender* taking it to task for their poor review. Another handwritten letter (4 January 1972) states that it is 'the best movie I have ever seen,' having 'seen it 8 times.' Another letter (no date) expresses surprise that the film had such a limited run which elicited a reply by producer Chuck Mulvehill on 17 February 1972: 'Mr Ashby and I are both as upset as you with regard to the handling of "Harold and Maude".'
- 37 Jamie Sexton, 'Creeping Decay: Cult Soundtracks, Residual Media, and Digital Technologies,' *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 13, no. 1 (2015): 12.
- 38 Cat Stevens' deal was originally \$10,000 for his services plus 25 per cent of the publisher's share of mechanical income from licensing, with Island Records (and A&M) having the right to use a single released on an album. At this stage, according to the contract notes, it was planned to release a single four weeks prior to the film's opening (on A&M in US and Island Records in UK). However, though Stevens was paid \$40,000 for the soundtrack, an album or single was not released with these two songs (F295 *Harold and Maude* – costs, Hal Ashby papers, MHL AMPAS).
- 39 Oliver Lyttelton, 'The Films Of Hal Ashby: A Retrospective,' *Indiewire*, 6 May 2011, <http://www.indiewire.com/2011/05/the-films-of-hal-ashby-a-retrospective-118773/>
- 40 F314 *Harold and Maude* – Legal, Hal Ashby papers, MHL AMPAS. This included \$200,000 to be recouped before payment of deferments. Ashby was due payments of \$65,000 fixed and \$35,000 deferred plus 10 per cent of the net profits. In a later audit dispute with the studio, Ashby claimed that he and the producers had not been paid their deferments or profits, claiming that \$150,000 was owed to them. The studio was unable to locate information covering \$537,769 of distribution expenses and did not include HBO television revenue (recorded as \$100,000 by June 1979). By 4 May 1981 a reply from Paramount stated 'everyone seems to think that the film is now operating in the black' and in an agreement made on 14 February 1984 between Hal Ashby and Paramount Pictures a settlement was made with \$233,283 added to the net profits, of which Mildred Lewis and Colin Higgins (as producers) received \$93,313 and Ashby \$23,328.
- 41 Thomas Elsaesser 'The Pathos of Failure,' *Monogram* 6 (1975): 13–19.
- 42 Robert Phillip Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Kubrick, Coppola, Scorsese, Altman* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

