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Intro to Film Studies

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### From Death to Life in "Harold and Maude"

Is it possible for any single film to stand in for the 1960s in American history as an authentic representation of people's attitudes at the time? Hal Ashby's 1971 film *Harold and Maude* achieves just this, in regard to at least the purposes of sex, in its depiction of the most unlikely of friendships. Harold's attraction to Maude, which is part of his attraction with death, created a friendship that started him on a journey away from death and to new life. This journey stood in for the social transition that had been going on throughout the 1960s, making this film a monument to the decade. This was a period in history where the standard role of sexual interaction being directly correlated to reproduction (death) was being challenged for pure pleasure (life) in its place, and we see that clearly in this film.

*Harold and Maude* is a comedic<sup>1</sup> modernist film<sup>2</sup> that walks us through the weeklong friendship between teenager Harold and 79-year-old Maude. The elaborate mise-en-scene<sup>3</sup> of Maude's belongings (which shows her carefree personality), and of Harold's activities, depicts their interior selves. His white skin counters the prep student he is and represents him being overly constrained by

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<sup>1</sup> This film is especially representative of slapstick, screwball, and romantic comedy. Comedy is discussed on FE 325-328.

<sup>2</sup> Modernist films critique modernity by exploring interior lives of characters and showing this through fragmentation, disconnection, and alienation (Nichols 188).

<sup>3</sup> Mise-en-Scène is everything in the set before filming (FE 70).

social values as well as depicting his emotional emptiness out of which grew his obsession with death.

The “Harold Visits Maude’s House” segment<sup>4</sup> opens with a white-faced Harold looking straight at the spectator, hence drawing us into the diegesis, as nondiegetic<sup>5</sup> music begins. Harold is white-faced as a representation of his simultaneous fascination with and fear of death. We then take on the point of view<sup>6</sup> of the art studio as we watch Harold walking up to us. Once he opens our door the music abruptly stops to both draw our attention and show how surprised he is at what he sees. The ice sculpture he sees Maude posing for represents the melting notion of sexual activity solely leading to reproduction, in its place allowing pleasure to be the sole purpose, and hence Maude is the embodiment of sexuality being detached from reproduction.

As soon as Harold asks for Maude, and we’ve been through a shot/reverse shot<sup>7</sup> of Harold asking for Maude and her responding, we jump cut<sup>8</sup> to Maude’s trailer. The speed of this emphasizes Harold’s discomfort with the studio. Maude’s posture, as well as the objects littering her trailer, tells us a lot about her. She feels lonely and so these objects help fill the emptiness that Harold also begins to fill. This entire scene is extremely sensory, which is alienating for the spectator as we cannot smell, taste, or touch what they can. Such emphasis makes obvious Maude’s childlike energy despite her age, while also emphasizing Harold’s old-age behaviors. Maude

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<sup>4</sup> This segment runs from 00:30:15 to 00:35:57.

<sup>5</sup> Nondiegetic elements don’t belong to the world of the characters (FE 186).

<sup>6</sup> Point of view is the position from which we see the action (FE 150).

<sup>7</sup> Shot/reverse shot shows conversations from both perspectives (FE 148).

<sup>8</sup> Jump cuts skip diegetic action when taking you from one shot to another (FE 168).

painting herself into other artwork, as well as being willing to pose for sculptures, shows us just how open she is to this new way of framing sexuality.

Maude walks around her trailer with Harold explaining her various creations, but is torn away from that upon reaching an erotic wooden sculpture that represents her own erotic fantasy of her sexual affection because the teakettle is whistling. Her asking Harold to feel this sculpture in areas that depict the female genitalia shows how she still has that in her own being. Harold actually does this, and we see this as an extreme close up<sup>9</sup> of his hand rubbing against the sculpture, with a point of view shot that shows us he can see Maude preparing tea in the kitchen. This stand in for sex gives Harold pleasure, which is further evidence of this film representing the decoupling of sexual interaction from reproduction. This entire tour is primarily medium long shots of the two of them.

We see that Maude's dining room table is just on the other side of this sculpture. Such an erotic sculpture having such a central location shows how central her sexuality is to her being, even at 79. Before she showed Harold it she was having him smell her snow scent, and we see our first real glimpse of this sculpture during that. So the sculpture, as tactile representation of her sexuality, places her sexuality at the literal heart of her trailer and life. Sitting at the table drinking tea the two of them are eye level to each other. This sets these polar opposites (in age, and in worldview) on an equal ground upon which to teach one another life lessons. Maude starts this by a breathing demonstration that represents her challenging of the

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<sup>9</sup> Close up shots show details of a person or object, such as a hand, perhaps as a way of showing nuances of emotion (FE 109).

societal norm for sexuality with the simpler and safer goal of pleasure over reproduction.

The segment titled “The Proposal”<sup>10</sup> opens with Harold announcing his marriage plans to his mother. Her dress and the entire mise-en-scene are white to signify compliance with social norms, while Harold is wearing black to signify defiance of such norms. Even his skin has lost the white look to emphasize this. The photo of Maude having a sunflower on the back represents how she is decoupled from society’s views of sex and creating new life for society through her actions. As Harold walks out he passes a wall of mirrors. This wall represents a turning point, where Harold is set on a path that will lead him to the life of pleasure and away from the death of reproduction, although he doesn’t yet realize this.

We are then taken through the reactions three mentors have to this announcement. This is shot in the mockumentary<sup>11</sup> style, but as that style’s ancestor wasn’t considered that. Despite what each individually says we see that all three are mostly concerned with the sexual activity, falling back on society’s expectations. Each clearly is also following the beliefs of those above them, as the pictures on the wall behind each of them signify. The 1960s broke away from the standard beliefs these institutions held, and this scene shows us that. By breaking the fourth wall the mentors are talking to us, which again draws us into the diegesis.

The birthday scene, during which Harold plans to propose to Maude, has an elaborate mise-en-scene that reflects postmodernism. We know that Harold set this

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<sup>10</sup> This segment runs from 01:19:48 to 01:25:47.

<sup>11</sup> Definition at Meriam-Webster, but talking heads on a character’s situation where the audience is being spoken to and the character isn’t getting the same advice.

up because he brings Maude into the room blindfolded, yet the sunflowers everywhere (a flower representative of life) aren't something a person obsessed with death would think of, even for birthday decorations. This is further evidence that Harold has turned a corner in his worldview. Yet Harold remains dressed in black, and his skin has also returned to its white look for the majority of this scene, whereas Maude is the one dressed in a brightly colored flowery dress. The music in this scene (which since they dance to must be diegetic, though we never see the source) starts out quietly and gets louder as we reach the climax of the scene. This draws our attention into the dialogue and its implications.

It is within this dialogue, done as shot/reverse shot with slight high angle<sup>12</sup> shots of Maude and low angle<sup>13</sup> shots of Harold, that we see the culmination of especially Harold's character development<sup>14</sup>. When Maude says the birthday celebration will be a lovely farewell we begin to see her liveliness slip away, and Harold's quizzical expression (as well as his skin getting more naturally-colored) denoting some of it entering him. She says this after exclaiming that she was happy already. Harold was aiming to propose to her, and with marriages generally making both parties happy this would presume that neither of them was fully happy at the moment. We see in this how what Harold was all along considering a romantic relationship was no more than a friendship to Maude. Certainly friendship is all society's norms would enable, but Maude still engrained in Harold this life of which society remained ignorant of and hence dead.

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<sup>12</sup> High angle shots look down on their subject (FE 112).

<sup>13</sup> Low angle shots look up at their subject (FE 112).

<sup>14</sup> Character development traces external and internal, regressive and progressive changes in a character through the course of a narrative (FE 230).

Upon hearing this Harold asks Maude what she means. Her diegetic response is that she took the suicide tablets an hour ago, and so will be gone by midnight. This is ironic, as someone representing new life for sex in society has chosen to end her physical life. Unlike Harold she clearly has no fear of death; indeed she welcomes it willingly. Initially Harold's physical reaction is not so different from his reaction to her previous statement. Moments later, though, he yells out "What!!", which becomes the sound of the ambulance in the next scene that we immediately jump cut to. It is in this very moment of his yell that Harold flips completely from a fascination with death to recognition of life. No longer will he playfully fake gruesome suicides, now that he has been faced with someone he thinks he loves really committing suicide. Life ultimately has prevailed in Harold just as the sexual revolution ultimately prevailed in the 1960s. Harold's yell becoming the siren is recognition that he has real concern for Maude and acted quickly, which someone who himself was really suicidal couldn't have.

The ambulance scene is shot with a grainy film that lends it a documentary feel. This is direct cinema, which captures what is there and so is overly real, which we can diegetically recognize by observing Harold's watering eyes and tears. The off-screen lighting furthers this effect, and lends a slight darkness to the scene that prepares the way for Maude to die. Maude self-selected death after she prepared the way for Harold to live, but we still must remember that Maude planned to end her life upon her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday before meeting Harold. Still, this is a metaphor for what happened regarding sexual expectations in the 1960s. It took the old institutions that held the reproductive view of sex to loosen their grip before sex for pleasure

could take hold (the mockumentary scene directly represents this). Maude's final statement that it is great that Harold loves her, so he should go love someone else, is a call to action for Harold much akin to how the sexual revolution of the 1960s acted. We're also seeing that Maude had to die for Harold to come to life, which parallels reproductive sex dying to enable sex centered on pleasure.

With those two segments now discussed our final task is to emphasize some of the character traits that enabled such action from both characters but which isn't wholly represented in the segments explained above. One question that pervades this film is why Maude has this carefree view of the world and insists upon returning Harold to life. Our telltale sign of the reason is when we learn that Maude is a Holocaust survivor in a brief glimpse at her arm<sup>15</sup>. Survivor's guilt<sup>16</sup>, which Maude experienced, has intensified pleasure as a symptom. This drove Maude's inventions and led her to give someone else life in the closing days of hers.

Harold's obsession with death had to come from somewhere, and that too we must dissect here. Throughout the film we see Harold's mother a decent amount but we don't even hear about his father. As can be gleaned from Harold showing the final date his mom sets up around his uncle may stand in for this role<sup>17</sup>, but as a military officer that means strict discipline and loose familial ties to Harold. If Harold's only father figure is his uncle, and his mother is so tightly controlling, then the obsessions Harold has flow from that combined familial situation. He is obsessed with that which would free him from the strong hold his mother has on him, yet the

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<sup>15</sup> This occurs at 01:09:41.

<sup>16</sup> More on this can be found at the Wikipedia and the materials it references.

<sup>17</sup> This tour occurs around 01:12:35.

very obsession blinds him from seeing other paths. To Harold death is the easy way out of something where there are other paths to travel down as well.

These traits are central to their respective main characters and help to show us how *Harold and Maude* could stand in for the 1960s. In my discussion of the two segments chosen above I discussed every relevant detail from each scene that showed us how Harold's interactions with Maude are truly displaying the transition of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Such an exploration necessarily cannot be purely technical as the context of the decade plays just as much of an important role, which is how we know this film is more of a monument than a film.

Film lasts in ways that humans cannot. As such I want to leave you with a few questions to ponder: Though *Harold and Maude* stands in for the 1960s is there any other time period that parts of it could represent or lessons it teaches that we could use in today's context? Are monuments of this sort still capable of being made in today's film industry, and if so what would be such films for the past decade? Harold and Maude as characters are the direct stand-ins, but across the film landscape can inanimate objects provide the same stand-in?

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