Discussion Questions for Women in Film-Cleveland Gathering, Wednesday, October 14, 2015:

Focal Film: *Harold and Maude* (1971; U.S.; Screenplay by Colin Higgins; Cinematography by John Alonzo; Music by Cat Stevens; Directed by Hal Ashby for Paramount Pictures)

In *Harold and Maude*, the primary characters are:
* Maude (Dame Marjorie Chardin), a 79-year-old eccentric force of nature (played by Ruth Gordon)
* Harold Chasen, a 20-year-old depressed rich kid obsessed with death and funerals (played by Bud Cort)
* Mrs. Chasen, Harold’s mother (played by Vivian Pickles)
* Candy Gulf, Harold’s first computer date (played by Judy Engles)
* Edith Fern, Harold’s second computer date (played by Shari Summers)
* Sunshine Dore, Harold’s third computer date (played by Ellen Geer)
* And a set of male characters that each represent an institution that must be ridiculed—a priest, a military man, and a psychiatrist

Some quick notes:

The film was chosen for the U.S. National Film Registry in 1997. The screenplay (adapted from Colin Higgins’ masters thesis at UCLA) is considered one of the top American screenplays (Sam Thomas).

Ruth Gordon had already won a Best Supporting Actress Academy Award for *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) when she was cast in *H&M*. Director Hal Ashby had to lobby with producers at Paramount to cast her, because she had done such a good job of portraying a truly evil character in *Rosemary’s Baby*.

*H&M* has been cited as a useful film to show in the psychology classroom when teaching issues of aging. On the other hand, it has been noted to be a negative portrayal of psychiatry (“Freud has become another icon of a system that demands blind conformity to a sterile and obsolete set of norms,” in the film, say Gabbard and Gabbard).

We chose this film for its highly unique portrayal of a non-traditional older woman, and I think partly because it stars Ruth Gordon, who co-wrote our recent Women in Film focal film, *Adam’s Rib*. There are other reasons *Harold and Maude* makes a good choice; for example, it is the first truly “cult” film we have discussed.

As usual, as I’ve researched the film, I’ve found popular and scholarly literature that has analyzed the film in a variety of ways. *Harold and Maude* has been viewed and analyzed as:

A CULT FILM

1. A cult film is defined as one that reflects a “subcultural ideology” in films, filmmakers, and/or audiences that is seen as existing in opposition to the “mainstream” (Jancovich). So, many different types of films might be cult films. I would add to this definition that a cult film must have a loyal audience willing to
watch it repeatedly. All of this is certainly true of Harold and Maude, which fared poorly at the box office upon its 1971 release, but is still enjoying midnight and retrospective screenings. It has been named the #4 Cult Movie of all time by Entertainment Weekly. What do you think makes the film a “successful” cult film?

2. Many cult films are difficult to categorize as to genre. Indeed, H&M has been named by the American Film Institute as the #9 Romantic Comedy of all time, the #45 Dark Comedy of all time, and the #69 Romance film of all time. How is that possible?

3. In a British Film Institute book on cult films, the cult appeal of H&M is seen as stemming from “both the absurdity and the taboo-breaking nature of the relationship” between Harold and Maude. Exactly how is their relationship absurd, and what taboos are broken? (BTW, these elements would fit the incongruity and high arousal categories of the Neuendorf and Skalski four types of humor.)

4. For screenwriter Colin Higgins (who would go on to direct such films as Foul Play (1978) and 9 to 5 (1980) before his death in 1988), the secret to Harold and Maude’s enduring appeal was this: "We're all Harold, and we all want to be Maude. We're all repressed and trying to be free, to be ourselves, to be vitally interested in living, to be everything we want." Your thoughts?

5. Like all cult films, this one is highly “quotable.” Are there any quotes that you can recall?

6. The film’s production style is also a bit outside of the “mainstream” (although it’s joined by a number of other films that were pushing the boundaries of technique at the time—the so-called “Hollywood Renaissance” films such as Midnight Cowboy, Little Big Man, and Chinatown). The use of Cat Stevens’ songs for a blending of diegetic/non-diegetic purposes is one noteworthy feature of the film. Did you notice this in the film—when Harold or Maude “interacts” with the Cat Stevens music?

7. Like a lot of other cult films, this one was a bomb at the box office, and was savaged by critics when first released. Pauline Kael dismissed the film out of hand, and Roger Ebert said “Harold is death, Maude life, and they manage to make the two seem so similar that life’s hardly worth the extra bother.” But the French loved it, and Bud Cort won the French equivalent of the Academy Award (Stuart Samuels). The film ran for three years in France. It was shown on college campuses and art cinemas in the U.S. in the 1970s, and slowly gained a following. Why do you think it was popular in France but not in the U.S.?

A DARK COMEDY

8. Again, H&M crosses many boundaries...even if we focus on it solely as Dark Comedy, it skewers a range of targets—war, religion, psychoanalysis, parenting, the police, and computer dating. Wes Gehring, in his book on Dark Comedy, refers to H&M as a “hodgepodge dark-comedy.” Do you think Harold and Maude successfully satirizes any of its multiple targets?

9. Gehring also notes that the film both begins and ends with Harold’s fake suicide, and implies that the “happy” ending of this dark comedy was indeed dictated by its status as a “coming-of-age dark comedy.” What do you think he meant by that?
A COUNTERCULTURE FILM

10. Because the film’s director, Hal Ashby, is viewed as the quintessential Hollywood outsider, the one true “hippie director” in America, H&M is often also seen as countercultural. Do you think it is?

11. In particular, the edit juxtaposing the field of daisies and the cemetery shot (with a slow pull-back to reveal so many gravestones) is seen by many critics as a direct metaphor, and a critique of the Vietnam war. Your thoughts?

12. The use of Cat Stevens’ music, analyzed as a countercultural touch by Mathew Bartkowiak and Yuya Kiuchi in their book, was a matter of some concern to both producers and to the musician himself. Ultimately, Stevens was pleased with the placement of his songs (all but two were already written and recorded before the film was made). He said both the music and the film had a synergy related to “rebelliousness and wanting to turn things upside down and to not accept what the great world was telling [us].” Do you think that Cat Stevens’ music contributes in this regard?

13. In his book on Existentialist Cinema, William Pamerleau compares Maude’s outlook on life to the views of Friedrich Nietzsche, concluding that Maude’s character goes beyond Nietzsche’s description of the “free spirit.” Pamerleau says, “Maude’s freedom...is far less directed at an engagement of stagnant cultural values and much more directed at day-to-day life and a personal attitude toward the world.” What are your thoughts on Maude’s brand of “free spirit?”

PRESENTING AN UNCONVENTIONAL PORTRAYAL OF AN OLDER WOMAN—AS SEXUAL, AS ROMANTIC, AS LIFE-AFFIRMING

14. The Maude character is represented in the film against four other female characters: Harold’s mother and his four computer dates. How do the four compare and contrast?

15. While Maude is indeed presented as vivacious and life-affirming, we must remember how the story ends. And is this a gender-typed conclusion? As gerontologists Elizabeth Markson and Carol Taylor note, “would a story featuring an 80-year-old man in love with an adolescent woman end with his suicide? Probably not.”

16. Professors of Nursing April Magoteaux and Joy Bonnivier write that in media stereotypes, “Older adults are often viewed as sexless with little interest in sex, despite research indicating otherwise (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007). Unconscious biases, such as these stereotypes, can often cloud or distort nurses’ assessment of older adults.” They cite Harold and Maude as challenging this, but actually via showing characters who share this stereotype. Who are those characters?

17. Director Hal Ashby is quoted (by Tiina Vares) as follows: “We didn’t actually have a scene of them making love...Paramount said it would be too tough for people. I said, ‘That’s sort of what the whole movie is about, a boy falling in love with an old woman; the sexual aspect doesn’t have to be distasteful’. They said it would turn everybody off. I was crazy about the footage. But it was a losing battle.” Would it have been distasteful?
18. In an essay on “The Female Aging Body Through Film,” scholar Elizabeth Markson first notes that Maude “may be the only female character in American cinema to have a romantic sexual entanglement with a man approximately sixty years younger than she.” Then, after referring to content in the film that reveals characters’ disgust with the union, Markson contends that Maude’s suicide “provides a tidy end that would satisfy psychiatrist, priest, and many cinemagoers alike.” Do you think that the ending is the only possible fate for Harold and Maude?

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Archive of Women in Film-Cleveland discussion questions: http://academic.csuohio.edu/kneuendorf/womeninfilm
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