

WOMEN & FILM

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ODD COUPLES: WOMAN AND MANCHILD

IN

HAROLD & MAUDE
MINNIE & MOSKOWITZ
MURMUR OF THE HEART

Beverle Houston and Marsha Kinder

In MINNIE AND MOSCOWITZ, although the characters frequently go to the movies, Minnie, the heroine, rejects them in various ways. After seeing CASABLANCA, she laments that movies have ruined her by establishing false models for love and happiness. Although Moscowitz has told her, in the familiar darkness of a movie theater, that she looks like Lauren Bacall, there is no Humphrey Bogart in her life or in reality. Although she later refuses to go to the movies because she has seen all their images, she admits that no matter how "bright" a woman may be, she is still affected by

the fantasies they have imprinted on her mind. MINNIE AND MOSCOWITZ, HAROLD AND MAUD and MURMUR OF THE HEART are three delightful romantic comedies that reject the old movie fantasies and offer, instead, a new vision of relationships between men and women. All three films deal with pairs that defy society either at a deep level (like incest), or at the more superficial level of potential social absurdity. In all three, a mature woman has a complex

Errata: Read Maude for Maud and Moskowitz for Moscowitz.



MAUDE

emotional and sexual relationship with a manchild--a man who is considerably younger, either chronologically or in terms of social behavior. Although it is encouraging to see films that help us out of the old fantasies, we must understand the new visions before we take them to heart.

In the old fantasy, it is the fatherly man who offers stability and protection to the child-like woman, who is socially, economically and emotionally dependent. This vision was particularly strong in the Victorian age where it was epitomized by Dora, the child bride in DAVID COPPERFIELD. Freud urged us to internalize this vision of relationships by arguing that it grows out of the psycho-biological nature of the species, while someone like Ibsen, in THE DOLL HOUSE, saw it as socially imposed and thus allowed his heroine, Nora, to escape from this pattern. Mr. Bruff, the loving but above all strong and wise lawyer in THE MOONSTONE (the first murder mystery, published in 1868), expressed the fantasy of the period in speaking about the

deviant characteristics of the heroine: "This absolute self-dependence is a great virtue in a man. In a woman it has the serious drawback of morally separating her from the mass of her sex, and so exposing her to misconstruction by the general opinion." Although in literature there are many older women who defy convention by becoming involved with a younger man (e.g., Phaedra, Mme. de Renal in THE RED AND THE BLACK, the lecherous old women of Restoration and 18th Century comedy, and the fading southern heroines of Tennessee Williams' work, notably THE ROMAN SPRING OF MRS. STONE,) their behavior usually leads to tragic or absurd consequences.

The old vision of the nature of male-female relationships is, of course, very strong in the movies, particularly in the western and detective film and in the romantic comedies of the forties and fifties which are particularly relevant to the films under discussion in this essay. Spencer Tracy-Katherine Hepburn movies often focus on an independent, even formidably competent woman who seems to be trying to buck this pattern. In PAT AND MIKE, she is a marvelous athlete who cannot win in the presence of her overprotective fiance. In the search for independence, she turns to Spencer Tracy, the "manager" who tells her when to sleep, what to eat and benevolently relieves her of the too-difficult task of living her life. One hardly need add that they fall in love. The Humphry Bogart of CASABLANCA and THE MALTESE FALCON, whom Minnie both longs for and



HAROLD

rejects, provides another variation of this pattern. More acceptable to the sophisticated woman because early in his films he maintains a cynicism born of experience, the Bogart character finally reveals his moral and protective virtues, and commits himself to taking care of "baby."

The new visions offered by the three films under discussion (which show conscious awareness of the old fantasy) reverse it in several ways. In all three, a mature woman provides the kind of stability and supportiveness usually seen as emanating from the man. HAROLD AND MAUD presents the most extreme reversal; she is eighty (old enough to be his grandmother) and he is twenty. With no father on the scene, Harold is involved in a life-and-death struggle with his rich, domineering, bitter-cold mother, who is trying to pass on this difficult child to a computer-chosen wife. Although Harold picks Maud himself, she originally pursues him and plays the guiding role. Yet she is the one who has the qualities of youth and introduces him to the joys of living;

he has come to her already half in love with death. While he repeatedly tries to win mama's attention and wound her as much as possible by staging elaborate suicides, he demonstrates his positive childlike values of imagination and rebelliousness through the rich invention of his "realistic" theatricals. All of his life energies are now being directed toward fantasies of death; yet the woman who is able to vitalize him is so fully engaged with death, but in a way that enables her to integrate it with life. The two funeral-goers first meet over an open grave and court in funeral chapels and hearses. Tattooed numbers on her arm reveal that her vitality has survived, or possibly even been intensified by, her experience in the death camps. When she decides that her eightieth birthday is the right time to die, she succeeds in committing suicide despite his attempts to save her. Choosing as boldly in death as she did in life, she is able through her final transformation to make him experience grief, love and freedom, moving him further into life. Her stability is not conventional, for she is courageous and loves to take risks (stealing cars, riding motorcycles, making wild u-turns), characteristics usually attributed to men. Instead she offers the stability of emotional engagement and full participation in life--the only stability present in the world of this film.

Though Minnie and Moscowitz appear to be the same age, she is elegant, sophisticated, working at a "glamorous job" (at the Los Angeles County

Museum) and living very well in a richly furnished, two-story apartment (made possible by independent wealth?) while Moscowitz, on the other hand, parks cars. Great expectations he doesn't have. But he does have beautiful golden hair that surrounds a funny face (definitely not the one in Minnie's fantasies) and a childlike directness and exuberance. Like Maud, Moscowitz is a risktaker, given to wild u-turns. Though he seems to batter her with verbal and physical aggression as have the other men in her life, there is one important difference--he really loves her. As he presses Minnie to allow herself to return his love, she explains that she is confused and frightened, afraid that she no longer feels anything. She is afraid of ending up like her older friend Florence --frustrated and alone--a fear that is reinforced by the fact that both Minnie and Moscowitz have single mothers. Nevertheless, Minnie is most worried about the father figure's reaction to her lover. In one important sequence Moscowitz is trying to persuade Minnie to go dancing, but she feels she is too old for the new dances. So they "slow dance" in the parking lot. When she finally gives in and they are about to enter the club, they run into her boss and his friends. She is ashamed of Moscowitz and doesn't introduce him, which makes her boss conclude that she is in trouble. Assuming a fatherly stance, the boss sees her home and then, with his mature bulk and power, beats up the waiting Moscowitz, whose youth and quick-

ness at first seemed to suggest that he would win. Instead, he blunders and k.o.'s Minnie. But Minnie accepts the responsibility for her cowardice (which led to the fight) and allows herself to be transformed so that she values the ability to love beyond social conventions.

In *MURMUR OF THE HEART* the conventional fatherly husband remains, but he pales in vitality and significance next to the emotional and sexual power of his wife Clara and their fourteen-year old son Laurent. In a family full of men dispassionately involved in cunt (the father is a gynecologist, the older sons a pair of ass-bandits), she's the only whole woman. The other representatives of the sex are a "stupid" medical secretary and an old servant--a caricature of the domineering prune, dedicated to preserving bourgeois values. Outside the family, the world of the film offers only whores, dowagers, and adolescent lesbians. Who else but mother can best welcome her son into manhood? Though she is childish in her social and sexual irresponsibility (her vulgar flirtation with Laurent's young friend), she's the one who, like Maud and Moscowitz, has the gift of life. Although she is uneducated, she gives this gift to her son "the genius." Her teachings have a more powerful influence on him than both the conventional lessons of the homosexual priest and the fascination with suicide in Camus' *MYTH OF SISYPHUS*. Valuable qualities are not identified with either sex, for they are shared by Clara and her sons. The

four of them are physically and verbally playful, laugh easily, exude warmth, and mock the bourgeois style. Only the father is left out. Though the conventionally stable father may see her as one of the children, the film endorses the view that she is sharing a camaraderie that transcends not only sexual differences, but the role distinction between parent and child. In one scene, for example, the son, the person with whom she makes the fullest emotional contact, comforts the mother when she breaks up with her lover.

When they return, drunk, from the evening's festivities, their sympathy, humor and love grow sexual as they comfort and embrace each other and, finally make love/commit incest. Thus the love between them is not some extraordinarily intense deviant passion, but grows out of the mundane and familiar--loneliness, need, and alcohol. This unsentimental sympathy makes it possible for Laurent to go out with unshakable confidence (when he gets turned down the first time, he merely seeks another girl), seduce someone of appropriate age, and return to join the fraternity of his father and brothers.

In all three films, then, both the woman and manchild are equally valuable, for they satisfy each other's needs in a way that transcends conventional role distinctions. In each film, one partner brings the gift of life to the other who is in some way moving toward sickness and death: Maud rejuvenates Harold, Moscowitz puts Minnie back in touch with her own warmth and love, and Mother repairs a heart murmur

and a false start as she helps her son along the rites of passage. The innovative quality of these films is that they force us out of the old movie fantasies and make us see relationships in terms of who actually needs what from whom and what each is capable of giving. If a woman is stable, independent, and playing the "adult" role, then perhaps what she needs from a man is the child in him, the playmate to set free the other side of

ing up yellow balloons. *MURMUR OF THE HEART* also ends with a happy family scene on the morning of Laurent's rebirth into manhood. Even the father can now join in the laughter, and the mother has the secret pleasure of knowing that this is the second time she has sent her son into the world. The ending of *HAROLD AND MAUD* also takes place in the morning and completes Harold's rebirth. The sadness of



Mother welcomes son into manhood... *Murmer of the Heart*.

her and keep her in touch with the energies of life. In all three films, this quality in the manchild is linked to the profoundest of needs--for rebirth and creation. *MINNIE AND MOSCOWITZ* ends with a romantic birthday party full of mothers and beautiful blond children, including not only their child (who was indeed made possible by Moscowitz's childlike energy) but also Moscowitz himself, blow-

Maud's death is mitigated by their having transplanted a tree together, giving it, too, a new chance for life.

Despite the new kinds of relationships affirmed by these films, the roles played by the women remain fairly conventional. In each case the woman seeks a man, implying that whatever her powers, her life is not complete without a central love relationship. Though Minnie's job at the

museum is glamorous and stable, it is ill defined; probably she is a secretary, but this is not made clear. The job is insignificant to both Minnie and Cassavetes the filmmaker. Basically she is still a conventional woman waiting to get married, but one who is resourceful enough to manage well during the waiting period--learning how to be "feminine," to cook, and to establish an elegant domestic setting. In emphasizing Minnie's independence and resourcefulness, her mother proudly describes an incident from her daughter's childhood. Little Minnie demanded that she be allowed to finish on her own a grown-up task that she had started--the task, however, is cleaning up the bathroom, the most inelegant example of the woman's domestic role. It is no surprise, then, that she finds fulfillment in mothering both child and man.

In *MURMUR OF THE HEART* Clara, the conventional dark heroine who is a social outcast from the French bourgeoisie, admits that she is "totally ignorant" and doesn't vote; she cannot support herself and is dependent on her fatherly husband. But, this unconventional film offers these characteristics only to show that they are of little significance, emphasizing instead her positive values of warmth, spontaneity, and emotional resourcefulness. These values, however, only increase her effectiveness in a more profound but equally conventional role--that of the instrument of a man's initiation. As the young whore tries to break Laurent in, she encourages him by



"A mature woman provides the stability and supportiveness usually seen as emanating from the man,"

saying, "When you're older, you're going to be a real lady killer." When Mother succeeds, Laurent proves his prowess by successfully conquering young Daphne. Like the whores and the "nice young girls," Clara's value is defined by what she can do for a man.

Though Maud is the most unconventional of the women, she fulfills the archtypal female role of muse and earth mother. With the experience of the concentration camps and European wisdom behind her, she is both muse and teacher to the young man. Like Catherine in *JULES AND JIM*, Maud's identification with the powers of art and adventure only makes her more fascinating as a woman. Ironically, however, each woman best serves her man by dying.

Having explored the visions of these films, we might ask: In what ways do they invite acceptance of the new relation-

ships they offer. All three present their visions through the conventions of romantic comedy, yet in differing modes of reality. *HAROLD AND MAUD* uniquely combines parody of the gothic romance with the black humor of social satire. Its comic exaggeration and typed characters are appropriate to both modes. Like the gothic romance, the film focuses on death and the transcendental power of love. Set in dwellings that are lavish, mysterious and ominous, the story includes a melancholy young man who is saved from wasting away by a benevolent fairy godmother. The film opens brilliantly as a young man in a lavish, richly textured room makes careful preparations for a suicide by hanging. The soft-faced son of such opulence might, indeed be conventionally decadent enough to seek death, and as he kicks away the stool and

slowly swings by the neck, we are shocked, puzzled and uncomfortable. Will someone come to save him, or are we being lured into some bizarre joke? When the mother enters the room ("Will she be in time to save him?"), her extreme indifference is the first comic questioning of the "realism" of the suicide attempt in contrast to its "reality" as theater. As the suicide joke is repeated, the realistic details get more elaborate (the blood-covered bathroom, the blood-curdling screams, the fire of self-immolation, the bloated limpness of the drowned body). Yet the audience in the film and in the movie house are increasingly aware of it as good melodramatic parody--Harold's act of hara-kiri is applauded by his actress date who tries to rival his performance. The social satire functions through a simplification that puts the joke right in front by means of comic repetition. Whenever Harold sees his psychiatrist, the visuals offer perfect sterile symmetry in which the two men, seated in identical chairs, wear the exact same clothing, implying, of course, the power of therapy to create replicas. This repetition is reinforced when Harold seeks advice about his forthcoming marriage from three male authority figures who offer three versions of the same message both verbally and in the parallel pictures which hang over their desks: the psychiatrist sits under Freud, the minister under the Pope, and the military uncle beneath a portrait of Nixon. This comic uniformity contrasts with the individuation and spontaneity that

is urged by Maud. Through this exaggeration in romantic parody and in social satire, the film develops an almost fable-like mode of reality, which has the power to convey with abstract clarity certain messages about the value of life.

MURMUR OF THE HEART offers a low-mimetic treatment of the most heavily charged archetypal theme--incest. The contrast between the realistic, domestic universe of French bourgeois life in 1954 (complete with allusions to Viet Nam, Mendes-France, Charlie Parker, and Ava Gardner in *THE BAREFOOT CONTESSA*) and the violation of a primordial taboo results in an ironic attack on social convention. The contrast allows Malle to thumb his nose at Freud in a comic way (giving another dimension to the laughter of the final scene) while committing an act of profound rebellion. The low key treatment of this extreme act (appropriately committed on Bastille Day) invites us not so much to incest itself as to the recognition that since anything is possible under the right circumstances, we must question all absolute prescriptions.

The texture of *MINNIE AND MOSCOWITZ*, like that of all Cassavetes' films, is characterized by an intense psychological realism. But in this one, Cassavetes tries the bold experiment of using this mode, usually associated with modern loneliness and frustration, to develop a romantic love story in which the golden couple lives happily ever after. Instead of the conventional smooth-flowing plot, the film structure is based on a series of intense

encounters between individuals who often shout, weep, and hit each other. This psychological reality invites a participation in experience which allows the characters and the film itself to get outside of conventional limitations. Even at her lowest times, Minnie has an emotional flexibility and openness which keep her in touch with life. When her angry married lover (played by Cassavetes) slugs her, at first she lies on the floor, sobbing. But instead of remaining the passive female victim, she regathers her forces and punches him over and over. When he comes to the museum to tell her he has decided to return to virtue (bringing his son as a witness), she does not accept his decision with tearful resignation. Pushed just a little too far by his cool declaration that he loves her anyway, she slaps his face. It is Minnie's full re-entry into her own emotional life that allows her to love the socially unsuitable Moscowitz. The stylistic mode of psychological intensity also allows the audience to give emotional assent to what is basically a conventional story.

All three films, then, offer a vision which combines the conventional and the innovative, both in aesthetic development and implications about life. All three, accepting the romantic vision in some way, affirm the possibility and importance of love. Yet they all suggest that it can happen in highly unconventional ways and, in breaking out of the limited fantasies of older films, they emphasize the importance of being open to every kind of emotional reality.