

**Down to the Last Detail:
Archival Reconstruction of Hal Ashby's Place in Hollywood Cinema
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Like Dr. Drake, I will also be talking about the American director Hal Ashby. However, I'll be taking a slightly more personal approach to the subject, as I discuss my research and how my visit to the Hal Ashby archives (at the Herrick library in LA) has given it direction.

During the height of his career – roughly, from 1970-1980 – Hal Ashby was one of the preeminent filmmakers in Hollywood. The films were, for the most part, critically well received, won awards, and in several cases did well at the box office. Films such as *Shampoo* and *Coming Home* touched a cultural nerve on release and became must-see films. Others, such as *Harold and Maude*, have become cult classics (in 2003 *Entertainment Weekly* listed *Harold and Maude* at number four on its list of the Top Fifty Cult Films). Additionally, Ashby was a technological innovator, shooting with the SteadiCam on a feature film for the first time, using video editing quite early, and being one of the first in Hollywood to experiment with non-linear editing systems. Finally, Ashby worked with some of the major talent of the era, on both sides of the camera (actors such as Jack Nicholson, Jane Fonda, Jon Voight; cinematographers Haskell Wexler, Gordon Willis, Laszlo Kovacs, Michael Chapman). Yet despite all this, Ashby has received very little academic attention. Journalist Nick Dawson published a popular biography of Ashby in March of this year (which draws extensively on the archives at the Herrick Library), but there is no other book-length study of Ashby – academic or otherwise. Furthermore, while his name and his film titles do pop up in academic essays (mainly those devoted to examining some aspect of the 'New Hollywood'), rarely do these involve any kind of deep analysis of

Ashby's films or career. More seldom still are essays devoted solely to studying Ashby himself .

It was this limited amount of attention that first drew me to the study of Ashby. The 1970s saw a new, cross-generational group of filmmakers who revitalized Hollywood, and Ashby was a vital member of it. The era continues to be the focus of sustained, imaginative scholarship, yet within that scholarship Ashby is *virtually* nowhere to be found. Thus, while the parameters of my research have expanded and contracted over time (as they do) and the angles of approach have shifted, the primary question driving my project has remained: where is Hal Ashby?

I visited the Hal Ashby papers at the Herrick Library in Los Angeles for three weeks in January of this year. (As Philip has pointed out?), the papers include 74 linear feet of material, covering much of Ashby's life (including boy scout cards and passports), but mainly the period from the mid-sixties when he was working closely as an editor with director Norman Jewison, through the end of his career and death in 1988. Needless to say, three weeks was barely enough time to get started on this collection, and I hope to get back to the Herrick library at least once more in the course of my PhD research.

While at the Herrick, I spent quite a bit of time reading through contracts and legal correspondence – some of which Philip has discussed in some depth, and some of which I'll return to later in this talk. But on arrival, the first thing I wanted to do was get a feel for Ashby's own voice and get a sense of his personal approach to filmmaking. At that time, Dawson's biography had yet to be published, and during his life time Ashby gave relatively few interviews, many of which are difficult to track down. Luckily he was a prolific correspondent who kept copies of many of his letters. He also seems to have kept nearly everything that anybody wrote to him, including

brief telegrams and angry letters denouncing him for one reason or another. I decided to start by looking at folders associated with his early films, *The Landlord* and *Harold and Maude*, and it was while going through the folder for *The Landlord: Music*, that I came across a long letter from Ashby to Jewison. Jewison had been Ashby's mentor – he gave Ashby the job of editing all of his late 1960s films, including *In the Heat of the Night* and *The Thomas Crown Affair*, and he set up the deal that led to Ashby directing *The Landlord*, his first film.

Music was an important element in all of Ashby's films, including those he edited for Jewison. He got into the habit in the early sixties of editing to specific music that he would then try to use in the films. With *The Landlord*, it was Neil Young. Ashby was friends with Young and they came to an agreement that the film would use some previously recorded music and that Young would also provide a few new songs specifically for the film. But it didn't work out. United Artists demanded that they receive 50% of the publication rights of any music in the film, but Young only owned 25% of the rights, the rest belonging to Columbia. Young was actually willing to give up his full 25%, but Columbia would only give up 12½%, which UA wouldn't accept. All of this became evident late in the editing phase (the events took place in January of '70, the film was released that May). As the deal was unraveling, Ashby vented in a long, ranting letter to his mentor Jewison, and I would like to read an excerpt from it because it really set the tone for my research at the Herrick. Along with other correspondence and Ashby's continuing contractual situations, the issues raised became the impetus for new and clearer direction in my research. Throughout the letter, he talks about his love affair with art, how his heart is with the artist, how badly it has hurt him to put Young in this situation. Then, in one section he writes:

If I can reach Neil, I'll ask him, as my friend, to give, and give, and let them all take. If I am unable to reach him, or he is unable to give, for whatever reasons, then we will move immediately to get someone else . . . but from this point on, I will never again let myself be put in a position where someone, or some thing, can dictate who I must use in the creating of my film, and especially in an area as important as the music. I know they aren't telling me who I must use, but they sure as hell are telling me who I can't use, and it all has to do with money. It doesn't have one damn thing to do with creativity. So I say Fuck UA and fuck anybody else who feels they have to put the possibility of some remote profit in the way of my doing what I feel is the best thing for my film.

This letter is telling because, with one possible exception, Ashby was put in similar situations on every film he made. One of the most striking aspects of the archives is how much of them are taken up with legal correspondence about, or personal reaction to the meddling of studios and producers who seemed constantly to be trying to change his scripts, recast his films, cut back on the music, alter locations, reduce pay, change the marketing strategy, and later in his career to have him removed from the editing process or fired all together. On his second film, *Harold and Maude*, there is a long series of letters between Ashby, Robert Evans and others about who will shoot the film (Ashby wanted Gordon Willis, who had shot *The Landlord*), and who will produce the film and how much influence the producer will have. With *The Last Detail*, there was a months-long struggle with Columbia just to get the film released – they objected on the grounds of language and wouldn't consent to a wide release of the film in the US until after Jack Nicholson's winning at Cannes in 1974 put pressure on them to do so. The list goes on and on from film to film, even when Ashby was at the height of his success, his films making money, winning awards, and being talked

about, so that, unlike many of his contemporaries during the era, Ashby was never given complete autonomy to make the films he wanted the way he wanted to make them. The greatest indignities came with his last three films, which were taken from him in editing or from which he was fired even before editing commenced.

So how has uncovering all this information helped me answer my question, where is Hal Ashby. While working with the archives and continuing my studies since, I began to see a series of related patterns emerging. First, in Ashby's position within the political economy of the New Hollywood era: regardless of how successful he became, Ashby was never fully a Hollywood insider, never truly embraced in the way that, however briefly, directors like Bogdanovich, Friedkin, Scorsese, and Coppola were. And yet, he continued to work within a system that treated him so poorly. This was a conscious decision on his part. Ashby was close friends with directors like Robert Downey and John Cassavetes who chose to work outside the Hollywood system as often as they could, and who sometimes encouraged Ashby to do so as well. But while Ashby wanted to make small, independent-minded films that were, as he said, "about people," films of substance, he also wanted his films to be seen by as many people as possible. About working on *In the Heat of the Night*, on which Ashby served as assistant producer and editor, Haskell Wexler has said: "We wanted to make a film that would make money, that people would see, and would also express our awareness that progress was being made and that human values can supersede bigotry."¹ In an interview nearly ten years later, in which he talked about his motivation for making Vietnam film *Coming Home*, Ashby says that Hollywood and the US in general, "should not forget that period in our history, that we cannot just say life goes on." In a sense, Ashby wanted to make independent films within the

¹ *In the Heat of the Night* – DVD commentary.

system, a system that never treated him like one of its own. A term that might thus be used to describe Ashby's position is "marginal," but I prefer to call it "liminal." Marginalization tends to imply lack of choice, but Ashby was ever aware of his decision to remain on the border of establishment Hollywood and a more independent-minded approach to cinema.

This pattern of liminality makes itself apparent again in the handling of Ashby within film scholarship. As I pointed out earlier, there is little sustained academic attention paid to Ashby. It's not that he has been completely ignored, however. In fact, the truth is more interesting. Film scholars are aware of Ashby, and seem to be aware of his importance to the cinema of the era, but they also seem to be at a loss with how to approach him. Much of this stems from Ashby's not fitting any of the currently accepted definitions of what constitutes a canon of 1970s American cinema. Generally speaking, New Hollywood tends to be written about based on a few very specific categories with the filmmakers of the era being judged on how well they meet those categories. First and foremost is the notion that the 1970s saw the apotheosis of an American cinema of the *auteur*. Ashby's career, his films, and his approach to filmmaking make it difficult to locate him within such a cinema. While his films do share particular aesthetic traits, such traits do not dominate the films. In a generally positive review of *Bound for Glory* in 1976, Andrew Sarris wrote, "Ashby interests me, but I have not yet completely figured out his style," an observation that continues to be made to this day. Jeff Wexler, the son of Haskell and a sound designer who worked with Ashby on every picture but his first, told me in an interview that Ashby most definitely was "NOT an auteur" and didn't think of himself that way. Ashby did think of the pictures as his, and did consider the director's to be the last word. But from his earliest days as an assistant editor to William Wyler throughout his career as

a director, Ashby's approach to filmmaking was collaborative – whether it was allowing Jack Nicholson to look through the viewfinder on *The Last Detail*, allowing Fonda and Voight to improvise dialogue on *Coming Home*, or telling Haskell Wexler on the set of *Bound for Glory*, “all you have to do is tell me that you're going to try something. I'm not going to jump up and down. If it works, great, and if it doesn't work, it doesn't work”² (Dawson 172). Ashby never claimed the title of *auteur*, never seems to have wanted it, and did not approach his films from the vantage of one who considered himself the sole author of the film.

Another criteria by which '70s cinema is often judged is how well a particular film matches the tonal or thematic concerns that much scholarship has settled upon as the driving preoccupations of the decade's filmmakers. Whether its Robert Kolker's cinema of loneliness, or Christian Keathley's pessimistic, post-traumatic films³, or Thomas Elsaesser's “pathos of failure,” Ashby's films never quite fit the prevailing notion that the great films of the decade were dark, pessimistic, paranoid affairs. To be certain, there are dark elements to Ashby's films, and he doesn't shy away from addressing political disillusion or personal dissatisfaction. His films depict marital infidelity, family dysfunction, institutional dehumanization, and suicide. But he never allows his films to descend fully into the bleakness that categorizes so many other films of the era. Thus, liminality again becomes an important term for Ashby.

Scholars recognize that he is an important voice and key player of 1970s Hollywood, but they don't know how to place him within the historical constructions of the era that have thus far been settled upon. An interesting example comes from Elsaesser's

² This is quite similar to something Wyler had told Ashby nearly twenty years earlier: “If you have any ideas . . . any . . . no matter how wild they might seem, get them out. I, or we, might argue with you, and tellyou it's a dumb idea and you are a dumb son of a bitch, but that doesn't matter because the heat of our anger comes only from the desire to make a good film [. . .] So get those ideas out in the open and remember, the only thing any of us wants out of all this is to make a good film” (Dawson 47).

³ From an essay in which Keathley lists *Shampoo* as a key film, but then declines to mention again after the introduction.

essay “The Pathos of Failure,” which was originally published in 1975 and updated for inclusion in the 2004 book *The Last Great American Picture Show*. (SHOW BOOK – point to inclusion of Ashby in the beginning and inclusion of *Shampoo* STILL, but failure to discuss Ashby further).

However, it is not the case that Ashby’s films share no thematic concerns. If anything, Ashby continued to be interested in characters on the edge of society, people who don’t fit in. In this, he is not dissimilar to many of his contemporaries. A major difference, however, is that unlike many of the anti-heroes of 1970s cinema, Ashby’s heroes neither reject society and the social order completely, nor attempt to overthrow or destroy them. Instead, they seek to fashion for themselves lives in which they can function both inside and outside the accepted social order. His characters are more aware of this in some cases than others – Maude clearly understands her role as a mediator between accepted norms and her own individualistic desires, as do Sally and Luke from *Coming Home*, and Woody Guthrie in *Bound for Glory*; whereas the sailors of *The Last Detail* are much less aware of their liminal position and Peter Sellers’s Chance from *Being There* is completely oblivious. However aware they may be of their situation, each of these characters could be described as living or attempting live lives that straddle the border of acceptable society.

Having attempted to outline these patterns of liminality that touch Ashby’s career in Hollywood, his treatment within film scholarship, and the films themselves, I don’t mean to suggest that the films are autobiographical in any standard sense. But the more one understands Ashby’s position within the political economy of New Hollywood, the more the films come to seem, in a way, as essays or meditations on the idea of liminality. If such a notion seems at first far-fetched, one need only consider that Ashby was very aware of the situation he was in, of the odds he faced,

and of the options in front of him. Near the end of his life, Ashby was fired from his final film, *8 Million Ways to Die*, soon after principal photography wrapped. He briefly considered suing the production company PSO that had fired him, and the Herrick collection includes the transcript of three days of legal deposition in relation to the case. At one point, Ashby gets into a tussle with the PSO lawyer about the meaning of creative control in filmmaking – who gets it and how it affects the outcome of the film. The lawyer is pressing Ashby to concede that he thought he had creative control and acted on such an assumption even though his contract stipulated otherwise. Ashby won't concede as much, but also thinks the notion is somewhat irrelevant. He says:

It costs money to make movies, and if they say they don't want to pay for it, then there isn't any creative control any more, is there? It is real simple [. . .] They have the purse strings. If they decide not to pay for it, I can have all the control in the world, and if they haven't anybody to pay to do it, it doesn't get done.

As much as Ashby resented studio interference in his films, he was aware that it was a necessary price to pay for the chance to make films in Hollywood, and he chose to pay that price again and again. It was his professional situation for more than two decades and when one becomes aware of this, it is easier to see why his films might concern themselves with characters who make similar decisions in life – to live with one foot inside the system and one foot outside it.

It was my trip to the archives that helped me to become aware of these patterns. And this awareness is pushing my research in directions I would not have expected two years ago when I assumed I would mainly be writing analyses of Ashby's films. But the question of where Ashby is cannot be answered simply by

arguing that his films deserve greater attention. And while I'm still too early in my research to give definitive answers to the question, I find fascinating the questions it calls forth about 1970s Hollywood – questions concerning the *auteur*, genre reconstruction, thematic issues, and canon formation itself. While I may not yet be ready to say where Ashby is, per se, I feel comfortable claiming that until that question is considered in more depth, any attempt at finally defining 1970s Hollywood is likely to be incomplete.