

Hal: A documentary about American filmmaker Hal Ashby (*The Last Detail*, *Shampoo*, *Coming Home*)

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Directed by Amy Scott

Hal Ashby (1929-88) was an American film director, generally underrated or unrecognized today, responsible for a number of valuable or, in some cases, provocative works in the 1970s. His credits include *The Landlord* (1970), *Harold and Maude* (1971), *The Last Detail* (1973), *Shampoo* (1975), *Bound for Glory* (1976), *Coming Home* (1978) and *Being There* (1979).

Hal is a new documentary, directed by Amy Scott, about his life and work.

Ashby experienced an outburst of creativity and social criticism under the influence of the broad popular radicalization in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

This radicalization as it found expression in the American film industry permitted the latter to make such films as Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Night Moves*; Robert Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, *The Long Goodbye* and *Thieves Like Us*; Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*, *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now*; John Cassavetes' *Faces* and *Husbands*; Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* and *Heaven's Gate*; and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*, among other works.

Scott, in her feature debut, examines Ashby's life in *Hal* through interviews (Norman Jewison, Haskell Wexler, Cat Stevens, Lee Grant, Jon Voight, Louis Gossett Jr. and Jeff Bridges, along with contemporary directors, who were influenced by Ashby, such as Alexander Payne and David O. Russell) and clips from his films. He comes across as a generally attractive and appealing figure.

Ashby, from a Mormon family, dropped out of high school and made his way to Hollywood, where he eventually found a job as a film editor. According to his

contemporaries, he was "obsessed" with his editing work. On one movie, says one co-worker, he didn't appear to leave the studio for seven months.

He served as assistant editor on William Wyler's *Friendly Persuasion* (1956), *The Big Country* (1958) and *The Children's Hour* (1961), George Stevens' *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) and Franklin J. Schaffner's *The Best Man* (1964), before editing Tony Richardson's *The Loved One* (1965) and a number of Norman Jewison films, including *The Cincinnati Kid* (1965), *The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming!* (1966), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) and *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968).

Scott's film reveals that Ashby was a firmly anti-establishment figure, someone who despised authority, including his studio bosses, with whom he had many run-ins.

His most enduring work, in my view, remains *The Last Detail*, one of the harshest and most realistic views of the American military. Ashby strongly opposed the Vietnam War, and his generally hostile attitude toward the military comes out in this drama about two hardened, cynical Navy "lifers," Buddusky (Jack Nicholson) and Mulhall (Otis Young), obliged to escort a young sailor sentenced to 8 years in the brig for stealing \$40 from a commanding officer's favorite charity. This study of "military injustice," in Nicholson's words, is also one of the actor's finest performances.

In a review of Richard Linklater's recent *Last Flag Flying*, a kind of quasi-sequel to *The Last Detail* (both films are based on novels by Darryl Ponicsan), we noted that "One has to acknowledge, unhappily, that

Ashby's *The Last Detail* had a stronger anti-military air and flavor to it [than Linklater's film]. By implication and by the feelings it generated at least, the clash between the hardnosed, plebeian Buddusky (during Nicholson's most biting and radical period) and the Navy command was a social conflict, essentially a class conflict. Buddusky and Mulhall were hirelings sent to do the filthy work that the powers that be subcontracted to them, and they hated it and to a certain extent hated themselves for doing it. That coldness and bitterness, that self-recrimination, despite the work's amusing moments, largely filled the screen. (*The Last Detail* was not, as one observer has noted, a film that would make you want to enlist.)"

But there are other of Ashby's films worth seeing. *The Landlord*, which would be impermissible in this period where racial politics reigns supreme, follows a wealthy young white man, Elgar Enders (played by Beau Bridges), who buys a tenement in Brooklyn for selfish purposes. He subsequently becomes involved with one of his black tenants, Fanny (the electrifying Diana Sands, a member of the original cast of *A Raisin in the Sun*, who would die tragically at 39 in 1973). She teaches him about life.

Harold and Maude is an overly quirky film about a romance between a young man (Bud Cort) and a 79-year-old woman (Ruth Gordon), who initially meet because they share the hobby of attending funerals. There are numerous amusing moments, and Gordon is at her most flamboyantly eccentric, but *Harold and Maude's* attraction of a "cult following" testifies to its somewhat strained and self-conscious character.

Shampoo was a commercially successful effort, co-written by Warren Beatty and featuring the actor—perhaps too prominently—as a prominent Beverly Hills hairdresser. It is meant to be a satire on the business practices, politics and sexuality of the Richard Nixon era. Jack Warden, Lee Grant and Julie Christie are particularly memorable in the film. *Bound for Glory* is a well-intentioned biography of left-wing folk singer Woody Guthrie (David Carradine), which, however, dilutes the politics of the Depression era.

The award-winning, staunchly anti-war *Coming Home* (with a screenplay co-written by the formerly blacklisted Waldo Salt) centers on a conservative military wife (Jane Fonda) whose husband (Bruce Dern) is deployed to Vietnam in 1968. As a volunteer

in a veterans' hospital, she meets and falls in love with a paralyzed Vietnam veteran (Jon Voight), who has become a determined opponent of the war. With Peter Sellers in the lead role, *Being There*, among other things, is a sharp satire on the media and the emptiness of the emerging celebrity culture.

Ashby, who we hear assert in Scott's *Hal* that "the upper class is full of shit ... that's what I basically feel," ran into a brick wall in Reaganite America of the 1980s. His artistic inspiration faltered and his problems with corporate executives mounted. Jeff Bridges notes that the producer of Ashby's last major effort, *8 Million Ways to Die* (1986), essentially "kidnapped" the film and fired Ashby, justifying it on the grounds of the director's drug use.

"I don't know how to deal with people who lie," says Ashby, in one of his final comments cited in Scott's film. He died of pancreatic cancer in December 1988.

Scott writes, "Over and above all the moments of love and human compassion in Hal's films, what still strikes me is his unwillingness to compromise his vision and his sense of responsibility to advancing social justice. He made extremely prescient films that challenged racial stereotypes and gentrification; examined military authority; celebrated love that knows no color, age or race; explored sexual politics during a time of national crisis; championed a socialist folk singer; illuminated the plight of veterans and the cost of war; and revealed the dark underbelly of corporate control of American politics."

Ashby's films are worth revisiting, as the products of one of the more genuinely anti-establishment and talented figures in the American film industry in the 1970s.



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