The Cosmic Dance – Love and Normality in Harold and Maude, Lars and the Real Girl and Her

By Neil Fox

‘Normal’ is a difficult concept to define and even when assigned can be quickly deconstructed and reduced to ash. It’s much easier to say what isn’t ‘normal’. People are much quicker and much more comfortable saying something isn’t ‘normal’ because somehow agreement can be found. It’s common for people to say something that is niche, unusual or uncommon is ‘not normal’. It’s common for strange to be ‘not normal’ instead of, or in addition to, well, strange - particularly when it comes to sex and relationships.

Defining something as ‘not normal’ has a power. It’s a power that alienates and exposes and creates distance. Cinema, like all great art forms, is littered with examples of outsiders engaged in all manner of enterprises that tell strange and unusual stories about relationships that manage to make the ‘not normal’ classification devoid of substance through their artistic craft and overflowing heart. In Harold and Maude (1971), Lars and the Real Girl (2007) and Her (2013) three lonely and alienated men engage in relationships that trouble conservative notions of normality and away from the silver screen might sadly spark fear and disgust in onlookers to varying degrees.

One perhaps unfortunate similarity all films share is that ‘not normal’ is defined as female. Bud Cort’s Harold, Ryan Gosling’s Lars and Joaquin Phoenix’s Theodore, in Her, embark on relationships with an older woman, female gendered operating system and anatomically correct female sex doll respectively. Despite this inauspicious factor the three films are not sensationalist about or exploitative of the central female characters or the sad men who seek their companionship and affection. All three films have charming and surprising approaches to what is ‘normal’ and if it seems that word is over-emphasised throughout this piece so far it should be said that it is all over these films in different ways and to different degrees, implicitly.

“She just wants to be normal and to have everyone treat her normal”

In Lars and the Real Girl, written by Nancy Oliver and directed by Craig Gillespie, Lars is a shy and reticent man in his late twenties raised by his Father after his Mother died giving birth to him. His brother (Paul Schneider), his brother’s pregnant wife (Emily Mortimer) and local community are all worried about him. Everyone wants him to be normal. Lars just wants to be alone. His brother asks if it’s normal for a man Lars’s age to spend so much time by himself. Lars comes out of his shell when he purchases a very realistic sex doll and introduces it - sorry, not it, Bianca - as his girlfriend. At first his family, co-workers and fellow churchgoers are mortified and uncomfortable but they quickly realise that Bianca is a manifestation of Lars’s mental illness and they get behind the fantasy as a way of supporting Lars. Soon though, Bianca has worked her charms on the whole town and become a central figure in many lives, not just Lars’s.

Writer Nancy Oliver says she conceived of the idea as a way of talking about mental illness. She told the New York Times around the time of the film’s release she thought, “what if we didn’t treat our mentally ill people like animals? What if we brought kindness and compassion to the table?” Her answer in this case is a story that allows the film to push through the difficult notion of ‘normal’ and arrive at an idealistic place that is profoundly moving. Upon arrival in town, Bianca is booked an appointment with Patricia Clarkson’s compassionate doctor for a routine check-up that becomes a weekly visit as the doctor seeks to slowly unravel the mystery of Lars in an attempt to make his life better or easier. Everyone takes the relationship seriously for Lars’s sake but the normalisation of it for his sake gives way to normalisation period. The support, lack of judgement and lack of awkwardness allow Lars to resolve the relationship and some of his mental illness in his own time and in his own way. It becomes clear that this is a relationship that may lead him to the relationship as he slowly recognises his co-worker Margo, played by Kelli Garner, as both a person and a person interested in him. Maybe it’s not recognition, maybe it’s an admission of these things to himself. After all, the first real action Lars commits to in the film is throwing a single flower out of sight when Margo sneaks up on him to say hi after Church.

The film skirts the potential pitfall of being just another film about a quirky sad white man by being genuinely funny, sweet and refreshing in its handling of mental illness in a small community. One of the wonderful ironies the film possesses is how for its duration a sex doll is present and yet sex or even discussion of it barely makes an appearance. It knows that there will be an expectation of being base and sleazy but eschews this for kindness and tolerance and as everyone in the community comes together to mourn Bianca after she succumbs to the illness that forced her back to the doctor’s every week, any ideas that she and Lars were in an unusual relationship are completely dispelled.

“Are these feelings real or is it just programming?”

One of the most surprising revelations upon revisiting Spike Jonze’s fourth feature film, his first as sole screenwriter, was how it challenged my assumption, misremembered perhaps, that the film was a critique of and warning about the dangers of over-engaging with technology. So normalized is Theodore’s relationship with his Scarlett Johanssen voiced operating system Samantha throughout the film the question becomes whether Jonze is so resolved to a future where human interaction is rejected in favour of relationships with technology or more interestingly, whether he used science fiction conventions and ideas to explore the contemporary and long-standing mystery of how relationships work and why they so often don’t.

Theodore is a man whose job is writing romantic and intimate letters between lovers and family members too busy, lazy or uncreative to do so themselves. He is going through a divorce from Catherine (Rooney Mara) the only character who displays what might be considered the expected disgusted response when Theodore says he is now (not actually) seeing Samantha, his OS. This is the only moment of external negativity Theodore encounters as he and Samantha get to know each other, become friends, become intimate, and fall in love. Her doesn’t avoid the truth that smart phones and laptops are gateways to sexual gratification but when the inevitable sex scene comes the film dodges a potentially tricky technical and performance bullet by fading to black and cleverly and sweetly reducing both Samantha and Theodore to just voices. It’s a beautifully intimate, private moment that also gives the couple equality in the minds of the audience.

Relationships of all kinds proliferate throughout. Relationships ending, starting, dating, divorce. Samantha and Theodore are just one of the relationships and this seems to be what the film is really about: relationships. It’s about how hard they are regardless of who is in them. Theodore reflects on his ended marriage with the acquired knowledge that she outgrew him. Sadly, the story binds him to the same fate in his relationship with Samantha and as the film draws to a close and Theodore finds solace and comfort as he frequently does with his friend and neighbour Amy (Amy Adams) there’s no raging against the machine, merely the sadness of readjusting to being alone again in a city full of people doing the same thing, yet to do the same thing or clinging to the hope of finding the relationship where both parties grow together.

Her skirts the same potential pitfall as Lars and the Real Girl by being a film that both empathises with but also pokes fun at a quirky sad white man. The first moments of the film see Theodore descend in an elevator on his way to work giving his OS a command to play ‘melancholy song’. After a few bars he commands it to play a ‘different melancholy song’. A very similar song plays. It’s almost as if Jonze is anticipating and fending off potential accusations from the outset. Like Lars, Her is shot through with smart humour, not least in the scene that follows the intimate darkness, as Theodore and Samantha navigate the awkward morning after.

"Eleven - is the subject of sex being over-exploited by our mass media?"

Harold and Maude, directed by Hal Ashby and written by Colin Higgins, is arguably the proto quirky sad white man movie. The 1971 classic is one of the best films that emerged from the “New Hollywood Golden Age” and stands out amidst the headily masculine Easy Riders, Godfathers and Taxi Drivers for its singular take on young male adulthood, sex, relationships and of course, death. Harold meets Maude, the catalyst for this sublime romantic comedy, on one his regular visits to a stranger’s funeral. They are both fascinated with death. He loves to perform increasingly elaborate fake suicides for the attention of his mother and she is nearing her 80th birthday and contemplating the end of her life.

She shows him the world in a daisy. They ‘liberate’ a tree and car after car after car after police motorbike on a series of adventures that see their friendship blossom into a deep, intimate connection that culminates in a post-coital morning after sequence that is not awkward at all, at least not for the characters. Maude sleeps serenely and Harold stares intently down the camera lens at the audience, baying them to judge, before nonchalantly blowing some bubbles, man-defining stubble visible on his face as if it emerged in ecstasy. This is not what his Mother wanted when she urged him to be serious and ‘normal’ and get married. Harold rejects all his Mother’s suitors and pledges his love and life to Maude, this incredible woman who has shown him the beauty of life. Rather than try and reduce his fascination with death Maude encourages it, seeing in it the ability to experience life more readily and emphatically, but at the same time helps him find balance by exposing him to the beauties that life has to offer.

Of these three films, this is arguably the relationship that would cause the most anxiety were it to spill off the celluloid and into the ‘real world’ for Maude is herself, ‘real’. Society still has a problem with old people being considered as sexual beings let alone engaging in active sexual relationships and even worse with a boy only on the verge of manhood. Harold and Maude transcends all those societal stigmas and taboos by being a beautiful love story and downright hilarious in places. Maude is an incredible woman, Ruth Gordon’s performance is magnificent and Bud Cort as Harold matches her beat for beat. Despite being rich and strange his loneliness and alienation is not navel-gazing and his love for Maude is not a rebellion. She does what his family, his Mother and Uncle, have failed to do. She sees him. Across a bustling graveyard he sees her – sneezing and chomping on an apple as she watches the ‘show’ with a picnic. She’s his kindred spirit and he doesn’t see her as anything else. Until that is, the occasion of her 80th birthday when she goes through with her plan to end her life despite finding happiness in the strangest but sweetest of ways with Harold.

All these relationships end in death, actual or symbolic, as they always do in life, as they always do in cinema. Superficially ‘not normal’, these are three beautiful cinematic encounters that shine further light on one of the ultimate mysteries - how hard and beautiful and sad and glorious love is, in all its forms.