

On Popular Epicureanism: Relationships of Theme and Style in *Harold and Maude* and *Bad Boy Bobby*

Christopher Hartney

To what extent can art transmit didactic content, to what extent can it teach? Is there an aesthetic relationship between a style of art and a lesson conveyed? In this paper I would like to look at two examples of art that go towards answering this question. The learning that I wish to examine focuses on an Epicurean content which, because of its lasting radical nature, speaks strongly in films that tend to be comprehended much more as “cult” than mainstream. After a brief discussion of themes arising from a two thousand year old legacy of Epicurean thought, I will trace some influences on two fascinating films that borrow ideas from this philosophical school for particular purposes: Hal Ashby’s *Harold and Maude* 1971 and Rolf de Heer’s *Bad Boy Bobby*, 1993. This paper is not an overall review of these films, but an examination of their philosophical content in this aspect.

In his essay, ‘Poetry, Prayer and Trade,’ A. D. Hope takes up a discussion of the didactic uses of verse as a strong problematic in the history of poetry.¹ He finds that the link between learning and verse reaches a workable compromise in some examples, Sir John Davies’ *Nosce teipsum* being one of the rare exceptions to succeed.² Yet, despite touching at the very foundation of Western poetry (Hesiod’s *Works and Days* and later Virgil’s *Georgics*)³ Hope suggests it is difficult to justify verse as a mechanism of mnemonic learning, education and discussion. The failures starkly overwhelm the successes; one of the more awkward examples being Erasmus Darwin’s poem on evolution,

Christopher Hartney is a lecturer at the University of Sydney where he teaches, amongst other subjects, on religion and film.

¹ A. D. Hope, *The Cave and the Spring: Essays on Poetry* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1965), p. 91ff.

² John Davies, *The Complete Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1876). See also E. Hershey Sneath, *Philosophy in Poetry* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), who writes “The work is a unique production presenting as it does in a formal manner, a complete rational psychology or philosophy of mind in verse. It is therefore pre-eminently a didactic poem – the aim being to present systematically the author’s speculations on the profound problems of the reality, nature, powers and destiny of mind,” p. 4.

³ For an examination of these poems as agricultural guides see, Stephanie A. Nelson, *God and the Land: The Metaphysics of Farming in Hesiod and Vergil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

which failed stylistically, though it may have inspired the author's grandson Charles to keep the question in the family. Finally one might claim that poetry in our age has simply moved too far away from an oral mentality to be useful as a device of education and discussion. Yet one could argue, contrariwise, as I will here, that the poetic structures of film, mixing rhythms of our quotidian speech in more stylistic kinds of film convey another poetry more open to the didactic in small doses and in particular styles: an additional poetry of image undergirds this.⁴ If the didactic is wrapped in narrative, however, I suggest it requires a particular aesthetic to thrive, something far more "cult" than mainstream and I will consider the role of the didactic trope in what we understand "cult" to be.

The two films to be examined, *Harold and Maude* and *Bad Boy Bobby* can be defined as "cult" because of how they were received by their audiences. This in turn relates to their content and both films have much in common. Both in a sense are *bildungsromans*, or tales of innocent meeting the world, they both touch on the genre of epic, and both reflect each other cinematographically whilst encoding within their structures a discourse on the atomistic and the Epicurean. There is, in these two examples, a strong link back to didactic poetry in the form of perhaps the greatest work to succeed as both poetry and philosophy: Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*.

Lucretius (99-55 BCE) is partly a philosopher, but more a poet. His words trace their origins to the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BCE). His epic Latin poem celebrates the Greek thinker and seeks to find an elegant way to translate this Greek school of thought to a Roman audience.⁵ Sadly, the once extensive works of the Greek are mostly lost to us. A biography and an epitome of Epicurus' philosophical system can be found in the tenth book of Diogenes Laertius.⁶ There are other fragments but, it seems, even Epicurus was too much for the Greek mind, certainly when it adopted Christianity, to allow his huge corpus of work and his thoughts to survive. A dimension of ignorance about this school led to the subsequent twisting of the philosopher's name to mean something quite different; the misconception that Epicureanism is more about eating extravagantly than a systematic philosophy designed to crush

⁴ A case could be made that film introduces us to a new style of orality and story telling as we see the paradigm laid out in Walter Ong's *From Orality to Literacy* (London: Routledge, 1982), esp chapter 2.

⁵ For a further discussion of Roman epic and Lucretius' place within this genre see, Peter Toohey, 'Roman Epic', in *Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, ed. Catherine Bates (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 31ff.

⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, trans R. D. Hicks (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925), see Book 10 with an examination of Epicurean philosophy from chapter 29 onwards, i.e. 558ff.

On Popular Epicureanism

superstition.

To know Lucretius' poem then is to understand Epicurus and his school in the most detailed way. Epicureans, however, were loathed also in Republican Rome and during the second century BCE, when the city was being invaded by Greek ideas. The Romans in fact saw fit to expel two Epicureans, Alceus and Philiscus circa 154 BCE. It is therefore strange that the great work of Epicurean philosophy comes to us from the Latin corpus at all.

We know almost nothing of Lucretius himself, yet in the fourth century the Christian writer Jerome provides us with a morsel that suggests one of two possibilities; that the creator of the Vulgate Bible had read something of Lucretius now lost to us, or that the saint was perpetuating anti-Epicurean Christian propaganda that suggested Lucretius was a sensualist obsessed with love chemistry, and wrote his epic poem in between bouts of madness. The fragment is stark,

Titus Lucretius poeta nascitur. Postea amatorio poculo in furorem versus cum aliquot libros per intervalla insaniae conscripsisset quos postea Cicero emendavit, propria se manu interfecit anno aetatis XLIII.⁷

The poet Titus Lucretius was born. After being driven mad by a love potion he killed himself by his own hand at the age of 44, he wrote some books in between bouts of madness, and these were afterwards emended by Cicero.

Lucretius' poem remained incomplete, but one of the first things to astound us should be its miraculous survival as an atheistic treatise in the libraries of medieval Christian Europe and its rediscovery in 1417 at the very moment when Western Europe's scholarly advancement was able to deal with the work as something other than the sacrilegious work of a madman.⁸

Another fascinating aspect of the poem is its take on religion. The work starts with a paean to Venus, yet Lucretius was writing from an atheist perspective; not in the modern sense as a denier of the existence of gods, but a man who believed that the gods did not involve themselves in the operation of the world in anyway. This has an interesting reverberation with *Bad Boy Bubby* as we will consider below. The cosmos could work without divine intervention because Epicureanism is based on an atomic foundation. Invisible and indivisible particles were believed by Epicureans to constitute all things. This

⁷ T. Lucreti Cari, *De Rerum Natura Libri Sex*, Volume II (Cambridge, Deighton Bell and Co., 1886) p.1.

⁸ See Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 1-16.

helped them explain how light worked (although their theory of how light intersected – by swerving particles - is nothing more than a delightful fancy). The theory of minute particles also helped Epicureans explain such things as plague, the eruption of volcanoes, how storms gathered and how earthquakes manifested; all through the change and transformation of atoms. Love was the act of two people firing atoms at each other. Thus atomism helped Epicureans explain the world as a rational machine, where atoms formed and reformed. The overall aim being the killing of superstition. Although generally Stoic in outlook, subsequent Roman commentators on philosophy such as Seneca and Cicero note that Epicureans were foremost in levelling, philosophically, the influence of superstition, as Cicero notes,

Epicurus vero ex animis hominum extraxit radicibus religionem cum
dis immortalibus et opum et gratium sustulit.

Epicurus however, in abolishing divine beneficence and divine benevolence, uprooted and exterminated all religion from the human heart.⁹

“Religion” in this instance could be better translated by the term “devout sentiment.” Or even “superstition.” Lucretius, of course, puts it more poetically,

Humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret
In terris oppressa gravi sub religione,
Quae caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat
Horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans,
Primum Graius homo mortalibus tollere contra
Est oculos ausus primusque obsistere contra,

When all could see human life thrown foully down
Pressed into the ground under the heavy weight of Religion
She who drew her source from the regions of the sky
Lingering with her horrid gaze over mortals
It was a Greek who was first to raise his mortal eyes against her...
The first to make a stand against her...¹⁰

Lucretius also celebrates Epicurus as the man who abolished the fear of death. In simple reasoning, he adds that as we don't know when we are going to die we should not fear its approach. As we will have no consciousness after we die, we cannot fear it, ergo, there is nothing to fear. Post mortem Epicurus and Lucretius believed that the atoms that constitute our body break down into the

⁹ Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1933) I, XLIII, p. 121.

¹⁰ Lucreti, *De Rerum Natura* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), Book I, p. 61-65.

cosmos and are regrouped into other forms, and to this extent there is no such thing as death – only transformation.¹¹

Harold and Maude

Hal Ashby, one of America's most outstanding film directors in the seventies, released one of his most famous films during the course of 1971. It has since become a cult classic and remains today both a challenging and charming film. *Harold and Maude* is based on a screenplay by film student Colin Higgins and begins by focusing on the fascination for death held by Harold and the existentialist qualms that arise therefrom. In a way, his fascination with death is a way of both dealing with his mother's meddling in his life, and ironically a way to grab her attention. She represents a 'standard-issue' America. She uses a computer dating service to find Harold an acceptable girlfriend, and employs the service of a priest, a psychologist and a family relative in the army to try to 'normalise' Harold. They all fail, Harold's fascination with death and its corollary life becomes a question for the answer that is represented by Maude and her Epicurean philosophy for life. It is this relationship of seeker and answerer that heightens the love between them, for the film is also a very profound love story; Maude taking the roles of both Harold's lover and teacher.

Set in an America of the very late 1960s, and framed by the Haight-Ashbury explosion of 'love' consciousness, *Harold and Maude* appeared at a time when all boundaries in Western culture were being challenged. It is against this that the two lovers of the story meet, here however, the man is a boy of nineteen [Bud Cort] and the girl is a woman of seventy-nine [Ruth Gordon]. They fall in love, they have sex and a sort of perfection is reached between them; their love is pure simply because it is so inappropriate, so extraordinary, so much against what is acceptable to our idea of romance even forty years later. Christopher Beach makes a comparison with *The Graduate* and *Sunset Boulevard* for their similar exploration of inappropriate younger man/older woman relationships, but concludes "...*Harold and Maude* takes an idea from the school of social realism and pushes it to the boarder of absurdity [and their relationship is presented as] ...clearly outside the acceptable limits

¹¹ This reminds me of a great line in the opening to a book on taphonomy, or the science of "reconstructing the chronology of a variety of postmortem processes;" that is, the forensic science of how organic bodies break down into the environment. The author bravely asserts in the preface that if taphonomy proves anything it is that the doctrine of reincarnation is correct – albeit at a very material level - as bodies we cannot disappear, the material that makes us becomes something else, just as, one might say, our presence as individuals goes on to influence other humans and live beyond us.

of American society.”¹² The film attempts to move the relationship from one of subversion (which is it) through to one of serious taboo-breaking. There were of course, numerous questions about the love scene which many people suggested be removed, but Ashby wanted “to show the beauty of young and old flesh together, something that he knew the younger generation, the hippies, the heads, the open-minded masses, would dig.”¹³

More poignantly the two lovers are ciphers for aspects of the vile and bloody twentieth century. Harold at nineteen is of conscription age for the war in Vietnam, and Maude in the course of the film reveals the tattoo on her arm that demonstrates she was lucky to escape the Holocaust. Maude also reveals much more. As when she takes Harold home to show him all the stuff she has collected, it is also true that she has collected a vast amount of information concerning experiences in Tibetan monasteries through to knowledge of old Europe. She is his teacher and the locus of the didactic element of the film. In this capacity she becomes his lover, that is, as the imparter of a universal truth. The knowledge from all her years is summed up in the flower scene at the centre of the film. It is framed by the two lovers having a picnic in a scrapyard, contemplating destruction as they eat, we then move to the next scene where Maude reveals her Epicurean intent. It starts as the two wander through a glass-house;

Maude: and I like to watch things grow. They grow and bloom and fade and die and change into something else.
ah life.

(We then move to a field of flowers)

Maude: I should like to change into a sunflower most of all – they’re so tall and simple. What flower would you like to be?

(We see a host of daisies.)

Harold: I dunno, one of them maybe.

Maude: Why do you say that?

Harold: Because they’re all alike.

(Maude remonstrates with Harold that they are not all alike at all.)

Maude: You see Harold, I feel much of the world’s sorrow comes from people who are this [indicating the bed of diverse flowers] yet allow themselves to be treated as that...

It is at this point that we see the lovers in a military cemetery where the fields are filled to the horizon with regimented white headstone graves. At this point the camera starts pulling back and Cat Steven’s “Where do the Children Play?”

¹² Christopher Beach, *The Films of Hal Ashby* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), p. 56.

¹³ Nick Dawson, *Being Hal Ashby: Life of a Hollywood Rebel* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), pp 129-130.

takes over the soundtrack. One might argue it is a very clever piece of Classical rhetoric, mixing the didactic with a stunning poetry of image and a heightened atmosphere of importance as signalled by the soundtrack.

It is in this way that Maude speaks of our atomic ability to break down as organic bodies after death and have our atoms reformed. The rows and rows of military graves threaten to overwhelm the scene and yet the camera continues pulling back. Ashby does something as a director few had tried before. He just keeps pulling back the camera until it becomes an extreme long shot, yet strangely our emotive distance from Harold and Maude amidst thousands of graves seems to increase in emotional intensity. We feel deeply for the two characters as the world envelops them. This is a noted part of Ashby's directorial technique, writes Darren Hughes, "[in Ashby's work]...the extreme longshot serves the same function that the close-up does for many film makers – heightening emotion at critical moments in the narrative – but it does so without forcing a shift to a particular character's subjective perspective."¹⁴

Additionally in this film, the longshot has a "theological" import (as it were), heightening a sense of Lucretian/atomistic cosmic indivisibility. As the conversation between the lovers has been about folding ones atoms back into the cosmos, it seems in this shot that all reality, including the reality of death, is wrapping itself around Harold and Maude and that they are seeping into the greater whole. Although Ashby worked without philosophical intent, he did remain sensitive to his story and here. Poetically, the medium becomes the message. For one might very well argue that we are looking at an Epicurean cinematography, one that will be reflected strongly in *Bad Boy Bobby*.

Through their love the two are able to escape their times, for a while at least, and Ashby makes a strong contrast between the claustrophobic house that Harold lives in with his mother and the outdoor settings that he and Maude inhabit. As they meet at a funeral it is fitting that at the end of the film they can't escape the reality of death. On her last and most wondrous night with Harold, Maude takes an overdose of pills because "Eighty is the right time to die". In both a Stoic and Epicurean sense of the word, she has come to terms with death, a development that only makes her more extra-ordinary as a character, underlining her faith in her Epicurean worldview. When Harold admits that he loves her, Maude replies, "Oh, Harold... That's wonderful. Go and love some more."

Thus there is a look and a feel to *Harold and Maude* that provokes boundaries in a way that parallels the provocation of Epicureanism in the Classical world. Death is regularly played with by Harold in his suicide

¹⁴ Darren Hughes, 'Senses of Cinema: Hal Ashby', archived at www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/04/ashby.html, accessed 12 January 2005.

attempts, Maude gets about breaking all sorts of petty laws, speeding, driving without a license, stealing trees from streetscapes to replant in the forest. Additionally, there is a didactic element at work in the dialogue that places the film on the extremes of studio film production in America in the way the film makes fun of Harold's wealthy mother and her attempts to normalise him. As a work of counter-culture emanating from the studio system, it is not surprising that the film has achieved cult status, yet it garnered this status in a rather strange way. As Dawson has demonstrated, Paramount seriously botched the release of the film. That is, the mainstream company really did not know how to market this challenging work. The studio released the film days before Christmas 1971, advertised it badly and mostly it ran no more than a week. There was a perceived failure of the film and reviews were not kind. The most famous being one of the first that called the film "as funny as a burning orphanage."¹⁵ There was obviously a gap in generations over the reception of the film. Dawson concludes,

Fittingly for a film so steeped in death, *Harold and Maude* had a Lazarus-like resurrection. It was booked by student film societies and repertory cinemas and gradually became a cult phenomenon, a movie that defined a generation and would resonate with generations to come. Over the course of the 1970s, the film played in some repertory cinemas for years at a time and was seen hundreds of times by its most ardent fans, gaining such an unlikely popularity that Paramount re-released it in 1974 and again in 1978. Over the years, it was the film that most inspired people to write to Ashby, often telling him how it had helped them through tough times with its message that one should live life to the fullest.¹⁶

Bad Boy Bubby

Whereas there are aspects of *Harold and Maude* that pick up epic themes: the lurking presence of World War II, the Holocaust and Vietnam which point the film in the direction of a commentary on national destiny, one can also argue that there is something of a fable in the structure of *Harold and Maude*.¹⁷ Something similar might be said of *Bad Boy Bubby*. Rolf de Heer, one of Australia's great film directors (consider *Ten Canoes* [2006]), wrote and directed the remarkable *Bad Boy Bubby* over a ten-year period and released it in 1993. It is, on one hand the story of an innocent meeting a complicated and brutal world (Adelaide) but it stands out because it touches more closely on the genre of epic – there is aspects of *The Odyssey* and Joyce's *Ulysses* in the way

¹⁵ Dawson, *Being Hal Ashby*, p.130.

¹⁶ Dawson, *Being Hal Ashby*, p. 132.

¹⁷ As argued by Beach, *The Films of Hal Ashby*, p. 59.

the film explores how a man leaves a home that has contained him for thirty-five years and confronts the world.

Most Australian films try to wrestle with the nature of Australianness, in fact they are often funded by the state on the basis that they do so. Not surprisingly, de Heer found independent funding for *Bubby* and he takes this Australian film to another level by concentrating on what Bubby as an innocent can say about human existence, the meaning of life and death, the place of god, love and sex in the world – albeit from a robust Australian perspective.

De Heer's film owes a great deal to Ashby whether or not he knew the debt at the time. From his cinematography through to his material there are clear reflections to Ashby's work. Nevertheless *Bad Boy Bubby* was also highly experimental. De Heer used binaural sound to put our ears in the place of Bubby's (as played by Nicolas Hope with microphones taped under his hair to pick up a particular sound). Moreover, de Heer utilized the work of thirty-two different cinematographers to keep the look of the film fresh. *Bubby* also has much in common with another Ashby film, *Being There*, which starred Peter Sellers as a middle-aged ingénue, Chance, who leaves his house for the first time in middle-age. He stumbles into the power elites of America and causes a sensation.¹⁸ In *Bubby*, however, the character of Bubby is more likely to cause a scandal and be the site of violence or become a victim.¹⁹

When Bubby does stumble into the world, a series of profound and hilarious scenes follow as the character tries to find his way. They build to one of the most revealing scenes in the film where Bubby stumbles into the company of a man known only as 'The Scientist.' His rant to Bubby is revealing. Inside a great power station, The Scientist begins to explain to Bubby the full ramifications of a godless universe; while generators buzz about them, de Heer places his camera on the overhead maintenance crane of the power station. As the scientist speaks the camera pulls back as far as Ashby does in *Harold and Maude*; we might ask is this shot an *homage* or simply a bit of creative theft? This scene is preceded by a church scene, in which Norman Kaye (The Scientist), both a significant Australian actor and professionally-trained organist, is found by Bubby creating 'wondrous' music.²⁰ Up to this

¹⁸ Christopher Hartney, 'The Garden and the Gardener: Towards a Cinematic Twist for America's Prelapsarian Fantasy', in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on the Sacred*, ed. Frances Di Lauro (Sydney, Sydney University Press, 2006), pp. 315-330.

¹⁹ James Finlan, in his film blog, describes the difficulty of enduring the first thirty minutes of the film, some of which was edited out by British authorities because it contravened UK cruelty to animal laws. See, <http://eireville.blogspot.com/2005/10/bad-boy-bubby.html>, accessed 31 January 2011.

²⁰ Not the only time that Norman Kaye has appeared in a film as actor and organist, see Paul Cox's peculiar but delightful *Man of Flowers* (1983).

point in the film, religion has been a major theme, so it is surprising for us that the organist turns into a scientist and directs Bubby to a very impressive power station gleaming in its hygienic perfection. In this scene the soundtrack is simple; the hum of the generators runs throughout.

The status of the scientist is both epicurean at one level and highly problematic at another. Firstly in the words of The Scientist comes an Epicurean spirit:

You see no one's going to help you Bubby, because there isn't anyone out there to do it. No one. We're all just complicated arrangements of atoms, sub-atomic particles – we don't live, but our atoms do move about in such a way as to give us identity and consciousness. We don't die our atoms just rearrange themselves.

This is all beautifully Lucretian so far, completely Epicurean. Yet as we have seen, Lucretius, whether as a literary conceit or not, took the gods as existent. His great paean to Venus whose loving passion keeps the universe moving is an important and unavoidable part of his poem. Lucretius, however, did not believe that gods or goddesses have anything to do with our reality. They don't save us after death and they don't intervene in life.

If there is a strong philosophical difference between the charm of *Harold and Maude* and the confronting aspects of *Bad Boy Bubby* we find in the The Scientist's following words as they begin to display a neurosis that has clearly invaded the West after two thousand years of Christianity and which in the mouths of Dawkins, Hitchens and their like reach their *apogee*. The Scientist continues;

There is no God. There can be no God. It is ridiculous to think in terms of a superior being – an inferior being maybe, because we – who don't even exist, we arrange our lives with more order and harmony than God ever arranged the earth.

Here the Epicureanism of the opening stands in contrast to a God who either doesn't exist or, if he does, is a feeble one, a God made more feeble by our ability to out-order him. The Scientist continues,

... we measure, we plot, we create *wonderful* music – we are the architects of our own existence. What a lunatic concept to bow down before a God who.

It is about here where we leave Epicureanism altogether and enter into a very self-contradictory rant on an *existent* God.

... a God who slaughters millions of innocent children, who slowly and agonisingly starves them to death, beats them, what folly to even think that we should not insult such a God.

Now the torturing existent God must be denied. This sort of self-contradictory language I find delight. The Scientist's anti-god rant makes out this God to be a threateningly real and existent force – a force we need daily to fight against

On Popular Epicureanism

and work at to unimagined.

Damn him. Think him out of existence. It is our duty to think him out of existence. It is our duty to insult him: fuck you God! Strike me down if you dare you tyrant, you non-existent fraud.

So the shift here of *The Scientist* to the second person where he addresses God directly in trying to deny him is maddeningly delightful – it leaves a crazy ambiguity in the air and undercuts the pedagogical intent of this character – still *The Scientist* seems intently focused on the deity as though he were real. In part the scene turns Buddy's life into something representing Western Civilization – mostly religious with a dawning suspicion that God exists, or existed, but who is now dead – to us at least.

It is the duty of all human beings to think God out of existence. Then we have a future. Because then and only then do we take full responsibility for who we are. And that's what you must do Bubby – think God out of existence.

The problem with *The Scientist*'s advice is fascinating: we have no future except for one filled with the obsessive act of thinking God out of existence. This is exactly *not* what either Lucretius, Epicurus or Maude advocate. The didactic element here is ameliorated by the slide into contradiction. Nevertheless Bubby takes the message of the scientist on board. He chants “fuck you God” through the next scene then makes reference to *The Scientist*'s words at the burial of a cat and when he meets Angle's parents before killing them.

Bad Boy Bubby, certainly makes the grade as a cult film. This is despite the mainstream awards that it earned, four Australian Film Institute awards and a Special Jury Prize at the Venice Film festival of 1993. It is regularly listed on cult film websites.²¹ But that is only a part of its appeal in this milieu. Again, like *Harold and Maude*, *Bad Boy Bubby* places itself at the very edge of acceptable in art and this in part contributes to its cult status. It deals with a range of challenging issues: incest, murder unpunished, animal and human cruelty, yet it retains a warmth that comes through in the curiosity and flexibility of Bubby as a figure who affirms in the end his humanity and the audience's sense of delight despite the cruelties that an uncomprehending world inflicts upon him.

Conclusion

We have established that both these films are regarded as cult films in their reception, yet what is it in their matter that places them in this field? In a very

²¹ See <http://www.screenjunkies.com/general/10-cult-films-you-should-know>, accessed 25-12-2010.

sense way it is the outsider dimensions of the main characters that enable these films to appeal to audiences. The process of identification is strong for audience members who consider themselves also on the fringe of mainstream perceptions of life. Harold and Bubby struggle to make sense of their outsider status by learning and attending to the examples of life around them. Moreover their manifestations of characters who will never be completely resolved to mainstream life expands the relationship between character and audience member. For as we watch these two figures both struggle to fit in and learn about pints at which they actually do not need to compromise themselves to be accepted, we learn as they learn. The didactic nature of these films is thus partly philosophical, partly made by example. For Harold his initial answer is clearly Maude, but after her death, it is her example. For Bubby he learns from a whole range of characters including The Scientist.

Throughout there is a tension at work – the mainstream is never far away and always ready to judge. For Harold, standard-issue reality is represented by his mother and a host of experts she brings in to cure him of his death-obsessions. For Bubby the mainstream is represented by the ongoing threats of violence that are visited upon him as he seeks himself a place in the world. I argue here that a clear part of the doctrine of being outside these “mainstream experiences of life” is underwritten by the Epicurean elements that have permeated the films. For Maude, the sorts of ideas that Lucretius was exploring, is at the heart of her worldview. For Bubby, the worlds of the scientist act as something of an antidote to the all-pervading religion of his mother and father. By presenting these characters as examples of humans willing to learn, these films both encourage their audiences to consider the Epicurean worldview without alerting them overtly to this learning. In the end what remains fascinating is the ability of these two influential films to utilize an age old philosophy to highlight the ever-present tension between a mainstream view of life and a life less ordinary. The didactic uses of the poetry of sound and image that is film remains a limited and yet a nevertheless powerful way to encapsulate a didactic element. That ideas more than 2000 years old can still form a fascinating challenge to our ideas of standard-issue life today remains a remarkable fact.