

H O R T E N F I L M K L U B B

THE UNBELIEVABLE TRUTH *Hal Hartley, USA 1989, 90min*
with Adrienne Shelly, Robert John Burke, Edie Falco, Bill Sage

A beautiful college bound girl disturbingly preoccupied with the threat of nuclear destruction falls in love with a handsome ex-con who is rumored to have murdered the father of his high school sweetheart. A warm-hearted satire about idealistic young love, capitalist moralizing in the home, and the need for work one loves.

Hartley's first feature and one of his most beloved comedies. Featuring the late Adrienne Shelly in her first film role before playing Maria in Hartley's era defining second feature Trust (1990). And Robert John Burke plays the enigmatic mechanic, Josh Hutton - an actor who would appear in a number of Hartley's later films.

TRUST *Hal Hartley, USA 1990, 105min*

with Adrienne Shelly, Martin Donovan, Edie Falco, Rebecca Nelson, John MacKay, Gary Sauer

Popularly regarded as one of the essential American Independent films of the 1990's, Trust is a romantic comedy told with Hartley's characteristic verbal dexterity and mordant wit - an hilarious and moving analysis of family violence and the moral courage it takes to defeat it and assume faith in others.

Be Good to Her And She'll Be Good To You

(by bell hooks, *Lion's Roar*, July 1996)



Hal Hartley's films are slow meditations. They create on screen an aura of stillness that invites audiences to pause and reflect – to really hear what the characters are saying, to really look at actions close-up.

In *Simple Men*, the security guard takes off the rosary that hangs around his neck, giving it to the bank robber with the clear admonition: “Be Good to Her And She’ll Be Good To You.”

This statement echoes in my mind and that of the other women viewers I know who love Hal Hartley films.

More than any other contemporary film-maker he turns the camera on to masculinity. He lets us see aspects of maleness from the perspective of male abjection and vulnerability.

While Hartley's films are, as one of his advisors says, about “romance and spirituality,” those issues are approached by a number of different film-makers. Hartley's films have a distinctive flavor because of the way he constructs male characters. He gives us men who rebel against the conventional patriarchal masculinity as much as any female advocating feminism. For their part, the women in his movies are always – always – claiming the space of adventure for themselves, no matter how turned on they might be by these strangelove male creatures Hartley dreams up.

In *Trust* we see images of troubled families where females and males are trying to bust out of the prisons set by overbearing and sometimes abusive moms and dads. Hartley captures the matter-of-factness of it all, the raw dailiness. His work is stylish without aestheticizing. All his films explore domestic space as a reflection of the inner psyche. Space is never just arranged to fit with narrative. It is there to offer compelling details and hints about what is really going on behind the scenes, as

the camera seeks to capture and interpret the minds of his characters. Tables, refrigerators, the bookstore – all the stock objects suddenly look different in his films, arranged and not arranged.

In *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust*, and *Simple Men*, ordinary landscapes convey tedium and the sense of meaninglessness and hopelessness that depresses everyone now and then. Against these landscapes, small dramas of betrayal and abandonment are enacted. In *Simple Men*, two sons search for their father to understand the truth of who he is and the legacy he is leaving them. They never find anything but fragments, yet as they search we see their vulnerability exposed. We see behind the mask of masculinity.

Amateur takes it further, exploring issues of forgiveness and reconciliation. Resurrected from symbolic death as the film begins, actor Martin Donovan rises as a man with no memory. He leaves behind one woman exploited, oppressed, and terrorized, then finds another to whom he offers care and solace.

Without memory he hopes to be given a second chance. The women struggle with whether to trust him. In the end it does not matter. All is not redeemed. Betrayal, Hartley's films remind us, makes everyone long for redemptive love, a way to start over. Life, his work tell us, offers us all just this – a constant opportunity for a change of heart.



Hal Hartley's Morality Tales: One + One + ?

(by Bérénice Reynaud, 21st Film Festival Rotterdam 1992)

In a banal suburban diner, a young man (Robert Burke) and a teenage girl (Adrienne Shelly) have just had an argument. She leaves, telling him to “drop dead.” The man remains alone at the table; at the left of the screen, another young woman appears. The following exchange is filmed in a single shot:

Woman: I know what you need.

Man: Excuse me?

Woman: You need a woman.

Man: Huh?

Woman: That girl's crazy.

Man: I know, but I like her.

Woman: But she's leaving town.

Man: So I've heard.

Woman: So, come on, what do you say? I know what you need.

Man: Excuse me?

The dialogue is then repeated four times (with a slight variation at the end), in a sassy, yet deadpan style. Suddenly, the film I was watching, *The Unbelievable Truth*, the first feature of a then-unknown 29-year-old director, took on a new resonance. There was a real insolence in the use of repetition, yet this formalist device, playful as it was, perfectly matched the emotional and narrative content of the film.



“When Adrienne Shelly and Robert Burke read the script,” says Hartley, “they told me it seemed to echo the exercises of the Meisner technique. Meisner is a very popular theatre teacher, who had broken off from The Actors Studio. I had never heard of him, so they repeated some lines of the dialogue for me. It’s a very effective exercise – I use it a lot now when I’m working with new actors – but I also found it very funny. I needed to write a new scene for that woman and Robert and knew what it needed to accomplish. But, as a result of the experience, I wrote it to have these self-evident

things repeated again and again.”

Repetition – its mechanism, its fear, its pleasure – is at the heart of Hartley’s work. Aggressively, a father will dare his son to “repeat what he just said,” characters will quote each other, in and out of context, fragments of sentences excerpted from books appear and disappear throughout the narrative. Often, the repetition has a spiraling effect: it helps a protagonist define his thinking (ie., for Hartley, his relationship to the world), either in a context of friendly male bonding (as in *Theory of Achievement*, when two buddies finally write the sentence that best describes them, having tried its multiple variations by adding a new adjective every time: “Young, middle-class, white, college-educated, unskilled, broke, drunk... I think we got it now,”) or outright confrontation (Jude, the literature professor of *Surviving Desire*, is violently attacked by a male student for spending one and a half months on a paragraph of Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*). Or, even more unsettling, the man is challenged by a sentence uttered by a woman and starts repeating it, in the vain hope of discovering its (her) secret. On the women’s side, repetition, at first threatening, finally exhausts itself to reveal, underneath, a more bitter truth.

Maria’s mother in *Trust* keeps holding her daughter accountable for the death of her husband, until she blurts out: “That man poisoned the last twenty years of my life. And Maria, with one slap, knocks him right out of it... The girl’s a genius.” Or Sophie, the alluring student in *Surviving Desire*, is forced by Jude to repeat, in the feminine, the text she thought she had written about her lover’s desperation and lack of faith – to realize, to her sadness and confusion, that she was talking about herself. Or, in the same film, a “crazy woman” keeps asking strange men in the street to marry her until someone proposes, causing her to admit that “she just wanted somebody to ask.”

Repetition to convince oneself of the truth (unbelievable or not), or to gain the “trust” of others – Hartley’s films are about the effects of language on the life, the psyche, the body of his protagonists. His characters are constantly carrying books and reading aloud from them, like Anna Karina in Godard’s *Alphaville*. But the compulsion to read, as well as the broken mechanism of repetition, have another origin: an unsettled debt. The murder of a father, the death of a mother giving birth to her son, the frustrated hopes placed by parents in their offspring, the failure of the adults’ lives that spills over into the next generation – Hartley’s films are filled with rebellious teenagers, brutal, psychopathic or cowardly parents, incompetent adults, young men angered by the stupidity of the establishment, thwarted ambitions, intelligence suffering in the confines of a demeaning job...

Beyond the hidden horrors of the family romance and the stifling boredom of the suburbs, something else has to be paid for – to be young, affluent, American, i.e. someone whose lifestyle is, somehow, responsible for, say, an impending nuclear holocaust.

The vagueness of the debt makes it all the more unbearable. Did Maria really kill her father? Is Matthew’s father a tyrant exploiting his son, or Matthew a sullen, difficult, ungrateful young man? Is it really because Matthew “found” himself (literally) in Peg’s bed that Maria had an abortion? Is Josh responsible for the death of two people? Should we really “never be frightened at our faint-

heartedness in attaining love,” as Jude asserts, quoting Dostoevsky? And why does the adjective “drunk” pop up immediately after the two friends in *Theory of Achievement* agree on the word “white?” You can never pay for being young, bored in the suburbs, angry in New York, mad at your parents – and, least of all, for being unable to love – for not knowing, as Jacques Brel used to sing, “who should forgive us.” Unabashedly, the quest for love is at the center of most of Hartley’s narratives (at its periphery for the two shorts produced for television). But, as in Chantal Akerman’s *Je Tu Il Elle* (a film he much admires), it was already too late before the story started.



With the notable exception of *The Unbelievable Truth*, Hartley’s love stories have no closure. The characters desperately try to be together, without much success. There is always a third term that intervenes. Ex-lovers, other potential sex partners (although people rarely make love in Hartley’s films), but mostly distorted figures of authority: fathers, mothers, buddies, the shadows of the dead (from dead girlfriends to dead authors). In another word – the Law. I will take this word in a filmic (the Law of the narrative) rather than purely psychoanalytic sense (the Law of the Father).

Hartley’s cinema is relentlessly dynamic. He never yields to the fascination of beautiful images, flawless symmetry, perfect closure – which, as film theory asserts, “stop the narrative” to replace it by aesthetic contemplation. His narratives are constantly riding the crest of a difficult equilibrium, which is why they keep arresting our attention. One of the best examples is the “love scene” in *Trust*. Matthew offers to marry the pregnant Maria “not because he loves her or anything like that,” even though he “respects and admires her.” Maria tries to make him admit that “respect, admiration and trust equal love” and, to prove to him that she trusts him, falls backward from a wall into his arms. Then she tries to convince him to do the same thing. Matthew refuses: being much heavier, he might kill her by falling on her. They argue. He seems to waver. But we’ll never know how much he trusts her. Something happening off-screen grabs Maria’s attention and the narrative takes another turn. At the end of the film, when everything is lost, Matthew asks Maria “Why have you put up with me like this?” “Somebody had to,” she replies, instead of the “I love you” expected – placing their relationship under the sign of necessity, mechanism, repetition – rather than the sloppiness of “feelings.”

In the name of what (of whom?) did she “have to?” The answer lies in the way Hartley handles off-screen space. If, as I suggested, the characters are never alone together (whether it is two people in love, two buddies talking about women, a father addressing his son), it is because there is always someone watching. Hartley’s mise en scene, his framing and editing, carefully construct the place of this hidden gaze – which does not completely coincide with that of the spectator, as Jean-Pierre Oudart noted in his landmark article about “the suture.” Most of these exchanges are filmed in tight shots, centered around the upper body or the face of the characters, without establishing shots and with very few reverse angle shots. As a result, the imaginary, diegetic space in which the spectator could project him/herself, is fragmented, uneven, filled with tension and surprises. In the “diner scene” it becomes obvious, after Audrey leaves the frame on the right and the girl enters it on the left, that the latter witnessed the previous argument, even though the spectator was not aware of her presence.

In addition, because of the lack of reaction and/or point of view shots, we are not always shown what the character sees, or who he/she is talking to. This is exemplified in *Trust*’s brilliant opening, starting with Maria’s sullen face asking an unseen father for “five dollars” (he comes into the field



of vision only at the moment of his death). In *Surviving Desire*, after Jude has confessed to Henry that he is falling in love, he declares that he feels better and that “the waitress is suddenly much prettier than when I first came in.” Conventional film-making would cut to the face of the waitress. Not Hartley. But the long-duration shot of the two friends conversing is not unbroken. When Jude describes Sophie, we are treated to a close-up of the student, sitting with her roommate in the same crowded campus café, ardently staring to a point off-screen, which creates the illusion

that she might be listening to Jude. But the physical space that separates the two tables is never shown (they are actually quite far and Sophie does not acknowledge Jude’s presence): the imaginary space created by Hartley is not realistic. In other cases, the fascination exerted by what happens off-screen is created solely through the soundtrack: when Maria’s mother and Matthew talk there is always a third term in their conversation. It may also be constructed in the spectator’s imaginary, as when Maria is sent by her mother to Peg’s room and comes back as if she had seen “nothing.”

Hartley’s love stories cannot be lived in a vacuum: Jude embarrasses Sophie by insisting that their relationship should be “acknowledged” by the outside: the gaze of the Other is what sanctions the validity of what is happening. In other words, the lives of the characters are determined, sutured, “framed,” by what is lurking off-screen: the hidden mechanism of fate, the mad bachelor machine unevenly distributing guilt, the sins not only of the father, but of a society on the verge of bankruptcy.

Hartley’s protagonists are modern Oedipuses struggling to come to terms with love, social responsibility, crisis of faith, while a giant shadow of doom is cast over them. The women, trapped in the apparatus as well, are part victims, part alluring sexual objects, part sphinxes; their very presence questions, unsettles, disturbs the complacent unraveling of male discourse. Even though they are no less “lost” than their male partners, they seem to have access to a different level of knowledge.

As early as in *The Cartographer’s Girlfriend* (in which a nameless woman enters the flat and the life of the protagonist), or even *Kid* (Hartley’s college thesis), male bonding is severely tested by the appearance of women. No matter how difficult it is, heterosexual love appears as what saves man from the sheer stupidity of male self-absorption. (However, it should be noted that if Maria succeeds in freeing Matthew from his father, the pre-Oedipal bond that links her to her mother is more twisted, more perverse and ultimately, more difficult to break.)

Having kicked a few asses and asserted his malehood in the streets of New York, the protagonist of *Ambition* meets a young woman who earnestly tells him: “The world is a dangerous and uncertain place. A few odd moments of respect and affection here and there is about as good as life gets.” He kisses her, then smirks: “I’m good at what I do,” and keeps on his torturous path of what it means to be a man.

Gracefully hovering between irony, urban despair and romanticism, Hartley films are rigorous, elegant, fascinating tales of the sheer impossibility *and* the absolute necessity of love.

27.03.2019 HAL HARTLEY

Neste film, 24.04. kl. 19.30:

DEMON BOX *Patrik Syversen, Norge 2017*



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