



October 24, 2006 XIII:8
M*A*S*H (1970) 116 min R/112 min PG

Directed by Robert Altman
 Based on the novel by Richard Hooker
 Screenplay by Ring Lardner Jr.
 Produced by Ingo Preminger
 Cinematography by Harold E. Stine
 Film Editing by Danford B. Greene

Donald Sutherland...Capt. Benjamin Franklin 'Hawkeye' Pierce
 Elliott Gould...Capt. John Francis Xavier 'Trapper John' McIntyre
 Tom Skerritt...Capt. Augustus Bedford 'Duke' Forrest
 Sally Kellerman...Maj. Margaret 'Hot Lips' Houlihan
 Robert Duvall...Maj. 'Frank' Burns
 Roger Bowen...Lt. Col. Henry Barymore Adlai Blake
 Rene Auberjonois...Father Mulcahy
 David Arkin...SSgt. Wade Douglas Vollmer/PA Announcer
 Jo Ann Pflug...Lt. Maria 'Dish' Schneider
 Gary Burghoff...Cpl. Walter 'Radar' O'Reilly
 Fred Williamson...Capt. Oliver Harmon 'Spearhucker' Jones
 Michael Murphy...Capt. Ezekiel Bradbury 'Me Lai' Marston IV
 Indus Arthur...Lt. Leslie
 Ken Prymus...Pvt. Seidman
 Bobby Troup...SSgt. Gorman
 Kim Atwood...Ho-Jon
 Timothy Brown...Cpl. Judson (as Tim Brown)
 John Schuck...Capt. Walter 'Painless Pole' Waldowski
 Dawne Damon...Lt. Storch
 Carl Gottlieb...Capt. 'Ugly John' Black
 Tamara Wilcox-Smith...Capt. Bridget 'Knocko' McCarthy
 G. Wood...Brig. Gen. Charlie Hammond

Bud Cort...Pvt. Lorenzo Boone
 Danny Goldman...Capt. Murrhardt
 Corey Fischer...Capt. Dennis Patrick Bandini
 Ted Knight...Offstage Dialog (voice)
 Marvin Miller...Offstage Dialog (voice)
 Noland Smith...Football Player, 325th Evac. 'Superbug'
 Fran Tarkenton...Football Player, 325th Evac.
 Johnny Unitas...Football Player, 325th Evac.
 Sal Viscuso...P.A. Announcer (voice)
 Howard Williams...Football Player, 325th Evac.
 Tom Woodeschick...Football Player, 325th Evac.

Oscar for Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium (Ring Lardner Jr.), Oscar nominations for Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Kellerman), Best Director (Altman), Film Editing (Greene), Best Picture (Preminger).

Selected for the National Film Registry by the National Film Preservation Board, 1996

ROBERT ALTMAN (20 February 1925, Kansas City, Missouri), has directed 43 films and dozens of tv episodes and dramas. He developed the form of interlocked narrative to a level that is frequently copied (e.g. Quentin Tarrantino) but never matched. In 2002, the American Film Institute named him director of the year for *Gosford Park*. In 2006, he was

given an honorary Academy Award “For a career that has repeatedly reinvented the art form and inspired filmmakers and audiences alike.” He has been nominated for seven other Academy Awards: *Gosford Park* (best director and best picture), *Short Cuts* (1993, director), *The Player* (1992, director), *Nashville* (1975, director and picture), and *M*A*S*H* (director). He has twice won the Golden Palm for best picture at Cannes –for *The Player* and *M*A*S*H* – and he’s been nominated for *Kansas City* (1996), *Aria*, *Fool for Love* (1985), *3 Women* (1977), and *Images* (1972). His most recent film is *Prairie Home Companion* (2006). Some of Altman's other films are *Voltage* (2002), *Dr. T and the Women* (2000), *Prêt-à-Porter* (1994), *Vincent & Theo* (1990), *Fool for Love* (1985), *Secret Honor* (1984), *Streamers* (1983), *Come Back to the Five and Dime*, *Jimmy Dean*, *Jimmy Dean* (1982), *Popeye* (1980), *Health* (1980), *Quintet* (1979), *A Wedding* (1978), *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976), *California Split* (1974), *Thieves Like Us* (1974), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), and *Brewster McCloud* (1970).

RING LARDNER JR. (19 August 1915, Chicago—31 October 2000 NYC, cancer) wrote 30 screenplays, some of which he wrote under different names during the time he was blacklisted as one of the “Hollywood 10.” Some of his other films are *The Greatest* (1977), *The Cincinnati Kid* (1965), *The Cardinal* (1963 uncredited), *A Breath of Scandal* (1960 uncredited), *Virgin Island* (1958, as Philip Rush), *"The Adventures of Robin Hood"* (1955 TV Series, uncredited), *The Big Night* (1951, originally uncredited), *Up Front* (1951 uncredited), *Forever Amber* (1947), *Cloak and Dagger* (1946), *Brotherhood of Man* (1945), *Tomorrow, the World!* (1944), *Laura* (1944 uncredited), *The Cross of Lorraine* (1943), *Woman of the Year* (1942), *The Courageous Dr. Christian* (1940), *Meet Dr. Christian* (1939). He won best writing Oscars for *M*A*S*H* and *Woman of the Year*.

DONALD SUTHERLAND (17 July 1935, Halifax, Nova Scotia) has acted in 143 films and tv dramas, two of which are currently in post-production: *Reign Over Me* and *Puffball!* (2006). Some of the others are *Land of the Blind* (2006), *American Gun* (2005), *Pride & Prejudice* (2005), *"Frankenstein"* (2004 TV), *Cold Mountain* (2003), *The Italian Job* (2003), *Space Cowboys* (2000), *Instinct* (1999), *Virus* (1999), *Fallen* (1998), *A Time to Kill* (1996), *Outbreak* (1995), *Six Degrees of Separation* (1993), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992), *JFK* (1991), *Backdraft* (1991), *A Dry White Season* (1989), *Revolution* (1985), *Max Dugan Returns* (1983), *Eye of the Needle* (1981), *Ordinary People* (1980), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978), *Animal House* (1978), *The Disappearance* (1977), *The Eagle Has Landed* (1976), *Il Casanova di Federico Fellini* (1976), *1900* (1976), *The Day of the Locust* (1975), *Don't Look Now* (1973), *Steelyard Blues* (1973), *Johnny Got His Gun* (1971), *Klute* (1971), *Little Murders* (1971), *Alex in Wonderland* (1970), *Start the Revolution Without Me* (1970), *The Sunshine Patriot* (1968), *Oedipus the King* (1967), and *The Dirty Dozen* (1967).

ELLIOTT GOULD (29 August 1938, Brooklyn, NY) has acted in 136 films and television programs. He is currently filming *Ocean's Thirteen*, due out next year. Some of the others are *Ocean's Twelve* (2004), *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), *The Big Hit* (1998), *Johns* (1996), *Bugsy* (1991), *Over the Brooklyn Bridge* (1984), *The Devil and Max Devlin* (1981),

The Muppet Movie (1979), *The Lady Vanishes* (1979), *A Bridge Too Far* (1977), *Harry and Walter Go to New York* (1976), *California Split* (1974), *S*P*Y*S* (1974), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Little Murders* (1971), *Move* (1970), *Getting Straight* (1970), *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969), *The Night They Raided Minsky's* (1968) and *The Confession/Quick, Let's Get Married/Seven Different Ways* (1964). Some of his tv appearances have been on "Poirot," "K Street," "Friends," "Las Vegas," "Baby Bob," "Getting Personal," "Touched by an Angel," "Burke's Law," "Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman," "L.A. Law," "The Ray Bradbury Theater," "The Hitchhiker," "Murder, She Wrote," "The Twilight Zone," "Faerie Tale Theatre," "Disney's Wonderful World," and "Saturday Night Live" (6 times).

TOM SKERRITT (25 August 1933, Detroit, Michigan) has acted in a few films (notably *A River Runs Through It* 1992, *Steel Magnolias* 1989, *Top Gun* 1986, *Alien* 1979, *The Turning Point* 1977, *Thieves Like Us* 1974) and well over a hundred tv dramas and series, some of which are *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, "The West Wing," "Will & Grace," "Chicago Hope," "Picket Fences," "Cheers," "The Twilight Zone," "The Hitchhiker," "The Dead Zone," "Baretta," "S.W.A.T.," "Barnaby Jones," "Cannon," "The Manhunter," "Kolchak: The Night Stalker," "Bonanza," "Gunsmoke," "The F.B.I.," "The Virginian," "Hawaii Five-O," "Felony Squad," "Death Valley Days," "Mannix," "Twelve O'Clock High," "The Fugitive," "Disneyland," "Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea," "My Favorite Martian," "Wagon Train," "My Three Sons," "The Alfred Hitchcock Hour" and "Laramie."

SALLY KELLERMAN (2 June 1937, Long Beach, California) has acted in 120 films and tv programs. Her most recent film, *I Could Never Be Your Woman*, is scheduled for release early next year. Early and late in her career she did a huge amount of work in tv series and made-for-tv films. Some of her other theatrical films are *Prêt-à-Porter* (1994), *Meatballs III: Summer Job* (1986), *Moving Violations* (1985), *Serial* (1980), *Foxes* (1980), *Welcome to L.A.* (1976), *Lost Horizon* (1973), *Slither* (1973), *Brewster McCloud* (1970), *The Boston Strangler* (1968), and *Reform School Girl* (1957).

ROBERT DUVAL (5 January 1931, San Diego, California) has acted in 131 films and television programs or series. He appeared in scores of tv series episodes before his first film role as Major Frank Burns in *M*A*S*H*. He was nominated for six best actor or best supporting actor Oscars: *A Civil Action* (1998), *The Apostle* (1997), *Tender Mercies* (1983, won, Best Actor), *The Great Santini* (1979), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *The Godfather* (1972). He has one film in pre-production (*The Last Full Measure*), one in post-production (*We Own the Night*), and one completed but not yet released (*Lucky You*). Some of his other films are *Thank You for Smoking* (2005), *Gods and Generals* (2003), *Assassination Tango* (2002), *A Civil Action* (1998), *Sling Blade* (1996), *The Scarlet Letter* (1995), *The Paper* (1994), *La Peste* (1992), *Rambling Rose*

(1991), *Convicts* (1990), *"Lonesome Dove"* (1989 TV), *Colors* (1988), *The Natural* (1984), *True Confessions* (1981), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *The Betsy* (1978), *The Eagle Has Landed* (1976), *Network* (1976), *The Seven-Percent Solution* (1976), *The Killer Elite* (1975), *The Godfather: Part II* (1974), *The Conversation* (1974), *Badge 373* (1973), *Joe Kidd* (1972), *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* (1972), *The Godfather* (1972), *THX 1138* (1971), *The Rain People* (1969), *True Grit* (1969), *Bullitt* (1968), and *The Detective* (1968). Duvall He has directed four films, *Assassination Tango* (2002, which he also wrote and danced the tango in, several times), *The Apostle* (1997), *Angelo My Love* (1983) and *We're Not the Jet Set* (1977).

Albert Lindauer in World Film Directors VII. Ed. John Wideman. The H.W. Wilson Co. NY 1988

“When my grandfather opened a jewelry store in Kansas City, he dropped one N from Altmann because they told him the sign would be cheaper.” His father, a successful life insurance broker, was an inveterate gambler. “I learned a lot about losing from him,” Altman told Aljean Harmetz. “That losing is an identity, that you can be a good loser and a bad winner; that none of it—gambling, money, winning or losing—has any real value; . . .that it’s simply a way of killing time, like crossword puzzles.” The director’s own proclivity for gambling is well-known.

A lapsed Roman Catholic now, Altman was educated in Jesuit schools before joining the army at eighteen. During World War II he flew about 50 bombing missions over Borneo and the Dutch East Indies.

He and a friend, Jim Rickard, set up as press agents for a time and then invented a tattooing machine and a system for identifying dogs. Before they went broke, they had tattooed President Truman’s dog in Washington.

Altman says that he first got into film because “I failed at everything else. I think I was originally attracted by the glamor and the adulation, and I thought I would be able to date Gloria De Haven.” With a friend named George W. George, he wrote and sold to RKO the script for Richard Fleischer’s *The Bodyguard* (1948) and buoyed by this success, moved to New York, where he attempted to make a living writing stories and screenplays. After an unproductive trip to the West Coast, he returned to Kansas City to work on industrial films for the Calvin Company, where as set decorator, cameraman, producer, writer, director, and film editor he learned to make movies himself. He also produced a series of short technical films for International Harvester, and at some point during this period made a second unsuccessful attempt to break into Hollywood.

In the summer of 1955, Altman decided to make a commercial film on his own. He found a local backer who was willing to put up \$63,000 for a film about juvenile delinquency, wrote the script in five days, cast it, picked the location, drove the generator truck, got the people

together and took no money for himself....The film was completed in 1955 and two years later released through United Artists, which had acquired it for \$150,000....*The Delinquents* grossed nearly \$1 million.

With this promising debut in feature film production, plus some sixty-five industrial films and documentaries to his credit, Altman was hired by Warner Brothers to coproduce (with George W. George) and direct *The James Dean Story* (1957), the studio’s attempt to cash in on the burgeoning cult surrounding the dead star.

The film failed at the box office, but Alfred Hitchcock saw it and hired Altman to direct episodes for his CBS-TV series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Altman completed two half-hour programs—“The Young One” (1957) and “Together” (1958)—before being fired, and then went on to develop a very successful television career in Los Angeles, working primarily as a director, but also as a writer and producer. Over the next six years, he directed about twenty different shows for such series as *Bonanza*, *Bus Stop*, *Combat*, *The Whirlybirds*, and the *Kraft Suspense Theatre*. He learned to work quickly and efficiently with limited budgets and tight shooting schedules, but he chaffed at the restrictive conventions of commercial broadcasting. Since it was impossible to vary the treatment of the hero in a series like *Combat*, Altman would sometimes concentrate on secondary characters instead, building them up over several episodes and then allowing their deaths to be casually reported in a later installment. He also began to introduce “adult,” political, and antiwar material into his shows, and to experiment with overlapping dialogue. He was regularly fired, but the industry was so desperate for experienced directors that he had no trouble getting further assignments. By 1963 he was making \$125,000 a year. At that point, mindful of “those hundreds of creative people who have just died in television,” Altman formed his own TV and film production company, which would be known as Lion’s Gate Films, in partnership with Ray Wagner. They had difficulty attracting backers, and Altman did little but run

up gambling debts for the next few years....

In a final break with television, Altman accepted an offer from Warner Brothers in 1966 to direct a low-budget space-flight film, *Countdown* (1968). James Caan, Michael Murphy, and Robert Duvall, astronauts preparing for the moon shot, seem to be permanently grounded by marital problems, alcoholism, rivalrous jealousies, and petty politics. With just a few days of shooting left, Jack Warner asked to see the footage Altman had assembled. He was appalled by its length and the overlapping dialogue, and fired the director....

Ingo Preminger of 20th Century-Fox offered Altman a script for an armed services comedy, adapted by Ring Lardner Jr. From a novel by "Richard Hooker," a battlefield surgeon. More than a dozen directors had turned this project down, but the 45-year-old Altman took it on and proceeded with the filming in such an unorthodox manner that at one point the alarmed male leads—Donald Sutherland and Elliott Gould—tried to get him taken off the job.

*M*A*S*H* (1970), set during the Korean War but with obvious references to Vietnam, follows the exploits of Hawkeye Pierce (Sutherland) and Trapper John (Gould), two wisecracking young surgeons assigned to a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital unit not far from the front lines. They work round the clock to salvage the wounded who are flown in by helicopter from the front, and resort to liquor, sex, and a series of ingenious and subversive pranks to keep from cracking under the strain. Their natural enemies are not the North Koreans but a pair of humorless inflexibles in their own camp—Major Frank Burns (Robert Duvall), an incompetent surgeon with a direct line to the Almighty, and Major Margaret Houlihan (Sally Kellerman), a highly competent nurse from a gung-ho regular Army background. In the brutal practical joke at the film's center, the heroes bug the bed the two Majors are using and broadcast their lovemaking over the PA system, sending Burns round the bend (and out of the war) and branding Houlihan with the name "Hot-Lips."

It is quickly apparent in *M*A*S*H* that we are dealing with the innocuous highjinks and patriotic resolution of the standard service comedy—both the humor and the vision of war are too raw and too real. Altman creates a sense of battle fatigue by filling the wide Panavision screen with people and objects drained of any bright colors, except for the spurting blood in the operating room. To this visual denseness is added a busy soundtrack, filled with overlapping dialogue, music, and PA announcements, often in broad contrast to what is happening on screen. The structure is episodic and the film rather tails off toward the end, but for most of its length it sustains an astonishing level of energy and invention.

Pauline Kael called *M*A*S*H* "the best American war comedy since sound came in," and most critics concurred. Not all at once, however. Some were sickened by the gruesome realism of the surgery scenes that "stitch

down" the picture, or put off by the apparent sexism and cruelty of some of the humor. "Hot-Lips is a good deal more vulnerable than the men who torment her," Vincent Canby wrote, "but the odd and disturbing suspicions that *M*A*S*H*'s good guys are essentially bastards are dropped (unfortunately, I feel) in favor of conventional sentiment." Richard Schickel, however, thought that the film's heroes might best be understood "as Robin Hoods of rationalism, robbing from the rich stockpiles of madness controlled by the people who make (and manage) wars and doling it out in inoculating life-saving doses to the little guys caught up in the mess."

The film won the Golden Palm at Cannes and was nominated for six Academy Awards, receiving one (for best screenplay). It earned \$30 million for Twentieth Century-Fox in its first year alone, and went on to become one of the all-time top-grossing pictures and, in a softened, sweeter form, the basis of a very successful television series. For directing the picture Altman received a flat fee of \$75,000. His son Michael, who wrote the lyrics for the film's theme song at the age of fourteen, is still collecting royalties.

With the success of *M*A*S*H*, Altman was recognized as a major talent. He received many offers to do big-budget studio productions, but opted instead to experiment with a small production at his own Lion's Gate Films. *Brewster McCloud* (1970) is about an alienated young man who wants to fly.... The film was a failure at the box office, with critical reactions mixed... It has since become a cult item and has been described by Altman as his own favorite: I wouldn't say it's my best film. . . "It's my favorite because I took more chances then. It was my boldest work, by far my most ambitious."

His next project harked back to his *Bonanza* days. For a long time Altman had "wanted to take a very standard Western story with a classic line and do it real, or what I felt was real, and destroy all the myths of heroism." With the ideas from an Edmund Naughton novel and a script based on it by Brian McKay, he set to work on *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971). Altman has always preferred a loose, freewheeling method of filmmaking in which actors are encouraged to flesh out their roles through improvisation. During rehearsal, and to contribute dialogue and even plot points to the scenario....

California Split is the first film of Altman's to credit "Lion's Gate 8-Track Sound," though the director had used multiple tracks and overlapping voices in many of his earlier pictures. With the 8-track system, Altman could record sound live from microphones planted on set or on location, eliminating a lot of cumbersome equipment as well as the necessity of postdubbing. He could also mix and unmix the sound at will. This advanced technology was exploited to the full in his next film, *Nashville* (1975), to create a virtual sound collage; in addition to the eight tracks for dialogue, sixteen more were used for musical numbers and background.

Nashville is Altman's triumph, the high point of his film career. Innovative techniques are used with dazzling success to relate the stories of twenty-four major characters who are involved in a Nashville music festival and political rally. The film interweaves its characters in a complex, discursive manner, without special emphasis on any single story, cutting from character to character as the viewer gradually discerns the connections—family, business, romantic—between these people. Altman has explained that each character can be broken down to an archetype. "We carefully picked those archetypes to represent a cross-section of the whole culture, heightened by the country music scene and extreme nationalism or regionalism of a city like Nashville"—a city with an image of great wealth and instant popular success, like Hollywood forty years ago." Another thing Nashville signifies is that we don't listen to words any more. The words of a country song are as predictable as the words of a politician's speech." There are plenty of both in Nashville; the similarities between show business and politics are at the heart of the film's disenchanted view of contemporary life.

Asked to develop a script that would deal with the country music scene (and end with a death), Joan Tewkesbury had provided an "open" screenplay, leaving situations for Altman to fill out, then for the actors to fill out, and lastly for the audience, as the twenty-fifth character, to interpret. ("I try to allow each individual to actually see and experience a different film," the director once said.) A fair amount of the dialogue was developed in rehearsal, and most of the original songs were written by the performers themselves, with the help of music director Richard Baskin. Despite the size of the cast and the improvisational aspects of the project, the location work proceeded smoothly, in the relaxed atmosphere of a summer-camp. A favored-nations contract clause among the stars had them each receive the same amount of money. *Nashville* was shot for about \$2 million in less than 45 days.

Altman described the experience as almost like making a documentary. "What we did was sort of set up events and then just press the button and photograph them." As he usually does, he shot the scenes basically in sequence, from first to last; he ended up with 300,000 feet of film (about twice the amount normally needed for a feature). For a brief time he entertained the notion of making two movies instead of one, but then began to edit the footage down to a single feature, cutting progressively shorter versions, from 8 to 6 to 3 ½ hours in length.

Before the final version was assembled, Pauline Kael saw and ecstatically reviewed for *The New Yorker* a three-hour rough cut. She called it "an orgy without excess" for movie-lovers. "It's a pure emotional high and you don't come down when the picture is over." She urged Paramount Pictures to release this version, but Altman himself determined the final length—159 minutes.

Some reviewers called *Nashville* the movie of the seventies that all others would be measured against. Others saw it as an unfocused, inaccurate mess, without even the consolation of genuine Nashville stars.

The subject of *Three Women* (1977) reputedly came to Altman in a dream that he had when his wife was faced with surgery—a movie-like dream complete with title, scenery, and actresses Shelley Duvall and Sissy Spacek already cast.

Altman insists, "I love *Quintet*—it's exactly the movie I wanted to make, and it turned out exactly the way I wanted it to turn out." Pauline Kael said, "Altman has reached the point of wearing his failures like medals. He's creating a mystique of heroism out of emptied theaters."

While a visiting professor at the University of Michigan, Altman financed and filmed *Secret Honor* (1984) in a residence hall with student assistants.

As Robin Wood points out, the relationship of a film like *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* or *The Long Goodbye* to its genre is "more complex and constructive" than simple satire; Raymond Durnat has argued that in films like these the director "systematically reopened the questions and off-key possibilities which genres may tend to close." Altman's principal weapon against the neat artifices of conventional storytelling has always been the busy confusion of real life, which he has suggested in his films by a profusion of sounds and images, by huge casts or crazy characters, multiple plots or no plots at all; and which he has invited into his filmmaking by his reliance on improvisation. It does not particularly worry him that audiences may miss something on screen or on the soundtrack; it would worry him if they didn't, for he believes that viewers ought to be able to look at a movie several times and still find something new.

In an essay in Richard Roud's *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary* (1980), Wood credits Altman with making "artistic sense out of the dominant technical devices of modern cinema, the telephoto and zoom lenses," devices that tend to create a sense of "dreamlike uncertainty, of instability and loss of control. . . . Altman's films reveal a consistent, recurring pattern to which these stylistic strategies are peculiarly appropriate. The protagonist, initially confident of his ability to cope with what he undertakes, gradually discovers that his control is an illusion; he has involved himself in a process of which his understanding is far from complete and which will probably end in his own destruction." Wood thinks that Altman himself "often seems only partly in control of the effects he creates"—the result perhaps, of a gambler's approach to filmmaking. It is generally agreed that his films constitute an uneven body of work, and most have not been commercially successful. Pauline Kael described his method as "exploratory"—"an intuitive, quixotic, essentially impractical approach to moviemaking."

In 1976 Bruce Williamson described Altman as "convivial, erratic, difficult, generous, funny, vulnerable

and incredibly, sometimes bitingly, perceptive about people. In physical appearance, he has been compared to Santa Claus, Mephistopheles and a benevolent Captain Bligh, and he fits all three descriptions.”

Charles Derry in *The St. James Film Directors Encyclopedia*. Ed. Andrew Sarris. Visible Ink, 1998.

... The older Robert Altman, perhaps that decade’s [70s] most consistent chronicler of human behavior, could be characterized as the artistic rebel most committed to an unswerving personal vision. If the generation of whiz kids tends to admire the American cinema as well as its structures of production, Altman tends to regard the American cinema critically and to view the production establishment more as an adversary to be cunningly exploited on the way to almost European ambiguity.

... As a postscript on Altman, one should add that he, more than any other director, should never be counted out as an important force in American film culture. If his work is sometimes uneven, the fact that he continues to work on projects which are political, ideological, and personal—refusing to compromise his own artistic vision—is a sign that he remains, even in his seventies, the United States’ single most ambitious *auteur*.

from *Video Hound’s WAR MOVIES Classic Conflict on Film*. Mike Mayo. Visible Ink. Detroit 1999

The long-running television series is so deeply imbedded in the public imagination that the true nature of Robert Altman’s anarchic film has been largely forgotten. Younger viewers who have not seen it and expect a longer version of the sitcom are going to be shocked, because in these more politically sensitive times, M*A*S*H could not be made. What studio executive would give the green light to a film with a black character named “Spearchucker,” a priest named “Dago Red,” and a dentist who attempts suicide because he thinks he’s becoming “a fairy”?

Seen with some historical context, Altman’s scathing anti-establishment comedy is far from perfect, but the best moments are riotously funny (for all the wrong reasons) and the film expresses the rebellious mood of America in 1970 with absolute accuracy. It manages to do so without ever commenting directly on the war. Though the setting is Korea, it’s really Vietnam. The only time Altman and writer Ring Lardner come close to making an overt political statement is in their funniest one-liner. When by-the-book Maj. Margaret Houlihan (Sally Kellerman) says of Dr. Hawkeye Pierce (Donald Sutherland), “I wonder how a degenerated person like that could have reached a position of responsibility in the Army Medical Corps.”

“He was drafted,” is the deadpan answer. In 1970, the line brought down the house.

War itself is not really a subject. The only gunshot in the film is used to end the climactic football game. The nameless broken bodies that are flown to the hospital are

the only evidence of the conflict. Altman shows war’s destructiveness in those graphic wounds and the bloody operating rooms. Those moments had never been presented so realistically on screen. Audiences were horrified, and so any further comment would have been irrelevant. Altman’s real targets are closer to home—organized religion and the military, both seen by the filmmakers as close-minded institutions, inimical to genuine human values. They’re personified in the characters of Maj. Houlihan and Maj. Frank Burns (Robert Duvall), both far removed from their TV incarnations.

As interpreted by Duvall, Burns is a more serious and sinister figure. He is such a forceful character that he would upset the shaky comic balance of the film if he didn’t make such an early exit. “Hotlips” Houlihan is more troubling. She is transformed, presumably by the embarrassment of the shower scene, from a competent if narrow-minded nurse into a brainless cheerleader. The change may be due to over-enthusiastic improvisation on Sally Kellerman’s part during the football sequence.

The protagonists are stronger characters, too. In the operating room, they’re accomplished professionals. Outside, they’re lecherous, sophomoric pranksters with a wide mean streak. Altman’s direction is completely in tune with the doctors’ knockabout attitude. He uses filters to give a rougher texture to the already rough surfaces of the MASH unit; long lenses that allow him to keep the camera at a distance to encourage ensemble improvisation; dialogue extended from one scene extended into the next; semilinear narrative. And within that often chaotic structure, the big scenes are masterful—the unforgettable microphone under the bed, the extended “suicide” sequence, complete with the Last Supper tableau, the use of the public address system as a cracked Greek chorus, even the nonsensical football game.

If, in hindsight, M*A*S*H seems harsher than it once did; it’s still funny and original, and its anger is not misplaced.

from *Altman on Altman*. Ed. David Thompson. Faber & Faber, London, 2006

Whenever Robert Altman is asked about his philosophy on film-making, his answer is usually along these lines:

“It’s the doing that’s the important thing. I equate film-making with sandcastles. You get a bunch of mates together and go down to the beach and build a great sandcastle. You sit back and have a beer, the tide comes in, and in twenty minutes it’s just smooth sand. That structure you made is in everyone’s memories, and that’s it. You all start walking home, and someone says ‘Are you going to come back next Saturday and build another one?’ And another guy says, ‘Well, OK, but I’ll do moats this time, not turrets!’ But that, for me, is the real joy of it all, that it’s just fun, and nothing else.”

Altman’s sandcastle analogy—which has provided

the name of his production company and office—has remained consistent throughout his career, one of the most extensive and adventurous to be found in the history of American cinema. He didn't begin as a studio tea boy or a precocious student but learned his craft by what would now be called corporate films in a wholly commercial world that explained the rules and techniques of a sport or the need for better road safety. From this, he graduated to television; not to the brow-beating, socially conscious live drama that spawned Sidney Lumet and John Frankenheimer but, rather, to inside the factory, churning out popular series based around simple concepts, likeable character actors and solid genre situations. Little of this prepared the world for the battered visuals, explosive humor and 'fuck 'em' attitude of M*A*S*H, which shocked the industry above all for being made not by a bearded 'movie brat' but a seasoned player of forty-five years of age/

Throughout the 1970s, now so often lauded as that great decade when American cinema had brains, sensitivity and an adult attitude, Altman seemed unstoppable, exploding myths and genres and creating the all-encompassing ensemble film *par excellence* in *Nashville*. These were films that revealed a truer American history, suggested life did not have happy endings and defied all expectations. Even while working with the major studios, Altman held to his independence and went his own way no matter what....

Putting aside the sheer volume of his work, it is Altman's turning upside down of movie conventions—the constant throwing out of the rule book—that has made him such a commanding presence. Surviving the constraints of little time and money in delivering hours and hours of generic television series clearly showed him exactly what needed to be done, just so that he could later undo it. Once liberated from the standard demands of master shot and close-ups to be handed over to an unseen editor, Altman began to let himself roam free, drifting around the scene like a bloodhound following a scent, zooming almost casually on to significant details or simply making surprise connections. By putting separate microphones on his actors, he found that not only could the camera be distant from the action, removing the performer's need to be aware of its position, but that he could also mix the sound to catch one conversation while filtering out another. All this contributed to Altman's determination to convey the fleeting nature of life as we experience it, with all the frustration of its lack of precision and the pleasure of happy accidents....

Although Altman has rarely talked about the inheritance of cinema with the passion, say, of Martin Scorsese, two directors to whom he has often paid tribute are Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman. And something of the polar extremes found in the work of these esteemed European *auteurs* is reflected in Altman's own swing between the broad canvas of multi-character, multi-

narrative extravaganzas (*M*A*S*H**, *Nashville*, *Gosford Park*) and intimate, troubled, metaphysical dramas, especially those focused on female experience (*Images*, *3 Women*)....

Above all, for him film really is a collaborative process, even if his embracing of the talent of others has led to some artistic partners moving enthusiastically in and uncomfortably out of his charmed circle. Famously, he has never been an easy director for screenwriters, who have found their carefully honed texts freely adapted and regarded as simply a blueprint to Altman's very personal sense of construction work.

from David Thompson interview

Bergman gave me the confidence to focus on a person's face and allow a character to have dignity. Fellini told me that anything's possible. And I know I've taken shots from Kurosawa's film and used them in mine....

The openness and variety of your films have often brought a comparison with the cinema of Jean Renoir. Is that something you recognize?

I very much like his work, but I don't know much about how any directors actually work, because I've never worked in any other position...And I've never seen another director working....

You've always preferred live sound, even if it's imperfect and not always clear, to recording dialogue after the shooting.

I was shooting at some big studio, Universal I think. I finished with an actor at lunch time, said, 'Thank you' and 'Goodbye' and all that, then went to lunch. And during lunch I saw him walking across the lot, and I said, 'What are you doing here? I thought you'd been dismissed.' And he said, 'Oh, I had to go do looping.' I said, 'What do you mean? He said, 'Well, as soon as we finished shooting, I had to go loop all of my scenes.' I found out that when an actor had finished working, if there had been any outside stuff, they were automatically sent to looping. The director was never present, and they'd loop the actor that day so they didn't have to pay to bring him back. I said 'Who was the director?' And he said, 'I don't know, some engineer.' I said, 'How can you do that without me there?' He said, 'They don't care *how* it's said, they just want it said.' So I raised hell and said to the actor, 'Don't you say one word of this stuff unless I'm in that room.' But that's the way they did it. They weren't concerned, because this was a manufacturing plant, and once the project left me, there wasn't anybody who cared.

I still despise looping, or post-synching, though we have to do it occasionally, and though I tell actors I don't do it, we always have to change a word here or there, 'north' to 'south' or some such. I also don't care if the audience hears everything, and that's pretty hard to get across—that it's not important that they hear every word or that they know what that person is saying. I think that films became too closely connected with theatre, and theatre is

about words and a way of presenting them to an audience in an unrealistic situation. If everybody projected like that at somebody's house, you'd leave the party.

I find that people always talk at the same time. In most conversations, by the time you get the first five words of your sentence out, the person you're talking to knows what it's going to be, has already formulated an answer and is starting that answer.

I was always trying to get away with this thing of actors talking at the same time. Lore has it that I started the fashion for overlapping dialogue, which simply isn't true at all. For my money, Howard Hawks did.... We were always trying to beat the censors, whether they were our own producers or whether, in fact, they were a real censor or a sponsor censor. It was always a case of trying to get beyond the limits they imposed.

The one series you really had some artistic control over was Combat, which still stands up as one of the most realistic depictions of war in a television series.

I produced the series: I had control over scripts, casting and everything, I wrote a few and directed every other episode for the first year. I went into it saying, "OK, this is World War II, we've all seen this stuff before", and I started from the position that all the Germans should speak German, unless there's a real reason they should speak English. It was hard to find actors who could do that.....

While you were waiting for your break into features, you made some comic short films, three of which you've occasionally allowed people to see: The Kathryn Reed Story, a birthday present for your wife; The Party, with Robert Fortier as a hapless guest at a very 1960s party, one of a projected series of juke-box movies called ColorSonics; and Pot au feu, a parody of a TV cookery programme explaining the recipe for a perfect marijuana joint.

I did those just for myself. They were unfinanced, just bringing together a few friends, borrowing a camera, and so on. But because of one of those films I got hired to do *M*A*S*H*: Ingo Preminger looked at *Pot au feu* and loved it, so it served its purpose.

You've always had a very liberal attitude towards smoking pot.

To me it's no different to having a drink at the end of the evening, except that's legal. Marijuana should be, because it's never killed anybody. It's been my drug of choice. I find it relaxing, but I don't think it really does anything for you on a creative level. I never drank when I was working, it never affected my work, and the same is true of grass.... I don't hide it or make an issue of it. In a generation or two, those things are usually no longer an issue.

Has that rebellious image worked against you?

It's not really served me well at all. My career has been hurt by it, but then so has everyone's the further away from the norm they get.

*What interested you in doing M*A*S*H?*

To me the fun of all of these movies I've made has been taking your mates and creating something like a stock company. The first people I think of for a film are people I've worked with before, usually most recently. And rarely have I had a film where somebody hands me a script and then I go and do exactly that script—even the ones that seem to happen that way, like *M*A*S*H*. I had worked for five years on a project called *The Chicken and the Hawk*, a World War I flying film, and the whole idea of making a farcical film with all these characters, filling the screen with people, started there. But I had no credentials at that time, and it was too expensive. When I was given the script for *M*A*S*H*, I thought it was dreadful, and on the face of it, I felt it wasn't going to work. There were no peripheral characters; it was just about five people and a bunch of extras. But I thought, 'I can make this picture by doing the same thing that I was going to do in *The Chicken and the Hawk* and fill it with all this life.'

I went up to San Francisco, where there was a lot of Theatre of the Absurd going on and you could see twenty-five people interacting on stage. I hired about twenty actors for *M*A*S*H*, many of whom had never been in a movie before. But to get them into the film, there had to be a corresponding name like Charlie in the script, otherwise the studio wouldn't hire them. So I went through the script and gave names to all these characters I wanted and put one or two lines in for each of them. Then, when it came to casting parts, the studio said, 'OK, we've got to hire somebody for this role.' And I said, 'Well, he's got to be in every scene.' I'd done this in television before, when I would give six people one line each in order to have extras whom I could talk to. And that's how that philosophy started, and how I was able to get into the system of the studios. When I began making movies, I was in no position to attract star names, and I think that also got me headed toward this sort of ensemble work that I like a lot.

When you began shooting on 14 April 1969 on the Fox backlot in the Santa Monica mountains, what were the studio's expectations?

It was a cheap picture that Fox thought would just play in drive-ins, and they didn't care too much about it. Fox had two other war movies going on: *Patton: Lust for Glory* and *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, both big-budget pictures. I knew that and decided that the way to keep out of trouble was to stay out of their sightline—and the best way to do that was not to go over budget or over schedule. The picture was budgeted at \$3.5 million, and I think I brought it in half a million under budget, which was a lot. But I said right off the bat to all my artists, 'Don't raise our heads, and don't draw attention to ourselves. Let's not go into the commissary to eat, let's not talk about the picture, because they're diverted. We can sneak this one through...'

What finally made you think you could work with Lardner's script?

The original book was terrible, racist and filled

with jokes for the sake of jokes. But Ring Lardner has added in operations, and I thought if I could make them vivid and real, these terrible jokes would work because that's how those guys kept sane. Nobody was fighting any idealistic war.

Lardner didn't like the movie. He said I'd destroyed his script and that I'd double-crossed him, and he was very upset about it. But when he won the Academy Award, he didn't say anything about me. He had also told me he thought I was going to win the directing award for sure, and so there was no point in me saying anything either...

Although the film is supposed to be taking place in the 1950s, it feels much more contemporary than that, from the haircuts on.

I had hidden the fact that it was set in the Korean War, but the studio forced me to put the legend in front saying, 'And then there was...Korea.' Although the book and script were set in Korea, to me it was Vietnam. I wanted to mix it up and have people thinking of it as a contemporary story—that is, 1969, 1970. All the political attitudes in the film were about Nixon and the Vietnam War.

Did the behaviour of the men in service reflect any of your own wartime experiences?

Mainly the silliness that went on. We were on an island with an Australian hospital, and that was great, as there were nurses and we would steal jeeps, smuggle whiskey in and have parties. Planes were commandeered for flying beer from Australia...all that stuff was the routine of the day.

The scene of Hot Lips' humiliation in the shower has a flavour of that.

Sally Kellerman was very nervous about that. I don't think she'd been naked in a movie before. I said to her, 'Just go in and take your shower, and when the curtain flies up, protect yourself at all times. It's no big deal.' I thought it was her modesty, that she didn't want to be seen naked for the usual reasons, but afterwards she said she didn't care about showing her body, it was just she felt her hips were too big. So it was her vanity, not her modesty. The first take, Sally hit the ground so fast that we couldn't tell what she was doing. So when we did the second take, Gary Burghoff, who played Radar, and I stood on either side of the camera with our pants down, so when the tent went down she saw the two of us standing there naked. That's why she froze before falling, and how we got the shot we wanted. She's a great actress, and I think the whole scene is one of the high points of the film.

What do you have to say about the treatment of women in the film? They certainly seem at the mercy of the jokes and whims and sexual needs of the men.

I remember once, in front of five thousand students, I was accused of being a misogynist. They were asking how could I treat women in this way? I said, 'I don't treat women that way. I'm showing you the way I

observed women were treated, and still are treated, in the army.' The same was true for gays and blacks. Of course, the film's humour level was very crude and loaded with sexist jokes, but our attitude was that nothing was as obscene as the destruction of the young men sent in to fight a war that was only a political situation, a terror set up by the right wing of America...

The operating scenes still seem very graphic.

Those were what really interested me, and I wanted them to be absolutely real and outrageous, with blood everywhere, and yet have everybody carrying on as if they were mechanics repairing an automobile. The actual scenes were medically accurate. We put a real surgeon, our technical advisor, in there, and all the actors knew what operations they were doing. We went to a lot of trouble to get the colour of the blood right.

*The grimy, unflattering camerawork on M*A*S*H was immediately distinctive. Was that hard to achieve?*

The first cinematographer I hired was just shooting a different film to me. I knew there was something wrong because I hired him over the objections of the studio, and they were telling him he had to be sure and do this and this and *this*, and I couldn't figure out why he wasn't shooting what I wanted the way I wanted it. Finally, I fired him and I got Hal Sitine, then an old guy of about sixty-five years old, whom I'd worked with at Warner Brothers on *The Roaring 20's*. I brought him out of retirement, and he did a great job—he was used to working fast.

*M*A*S*H already has your trademark use of slow zooms.*

I did that a lot as soon as the zoom lens appeared. It was a tool, and I got a lot of criticism for it. 'Oh, you should never move that camera, those zooms are false and they change the whole perspective.' I said, 'I know what they do, but this is the way I'm telling this story.' And I did a lot of that, a lot of arbitrary moves with the zoom lens. Now everybody's doing it.

How did you get the rough-hewn look of the film?

Except for the football game, we put number three fog filters on the camera, always trying to destroy the colour image, making it dirty rather than crisp and bright. When we did *Combat* we were shooting in black and white, and it was easier to evoke those kind of things. Colour was a different issue. But when it comes to these choices, you say these things in interviews to justify what you've done, and from that point on, that's what I think. So there's probably 60 percent truth and 40 percent fiction in it! I still do the same thing today. I say to myself, 'Why have I done that? Oh, I know...'

So these choices were always instinctive?

I don't know if anything in film can be completely instinctual for me, as I've done so much. Every one of these things I do, whatever they are, these little techniques or idiosyncrasies, have been done for some reason. Nobody's the inventor of anything.

How much of your distinctive visual style then is in

the pre-planning with cinematographers?

My head is full of smoke and fog—I don't see anything, I just know that if you blow it away, we'll see it. I don't know how I'm going to shoot a film at first. I'll talk about things with a cinematographer, but we never resolve anything. We're still talking right up until the time we have to shoot. Suddenly, then, the visual style of the film is set. But the minute you make a rule, you break it. And if you don't break it, you're a fool.

My marriages with cinematographers normally last about three pictures, because if you work with the same people you begin to know what each other is going to do. There comes a natural time to go and seek out other partners—at least on a weekend...

*Everyone remembers the PA announcements of M*A*S*H as a high point.*

The film was too jumpy: I needed a form of punctuation. We were already into the editing, and I remember coming up with the idea one day just as I was turning into my driveway. Danny Greene, my editor, went out and made a lot of shots of loudspeakers, and we used them like chapter headings, taking stuff from an official army manual from 1951. All the films mentioned were old Fox titles. One announcement came from a memo from the head of the editorial department at the studio. We'd had photographs up on the wall in the editing room, and a memo had come around: 'Take down all pictures of naked girls!'

Wasn't this the first time the word 'fuck' was heard

in a mainstream picture?

It was the first time it was ever used outside of an X-rated picture. It was the actor John Schuck who decided to say it during the football game, and he did it as a joke. It certainly wasn't written and I didn't tell him to do it. But in the dailies, there it was. The reason it was eventually allowed in an R-rated picture was that it wasn't used in a sexual context; it was just profanity.

Your son shares a credit for the title song, 'Suicide is Painless'.

We needed a song, and I came up with this title. My son, Michael, who was thirteen or so then, was writing songs, so I suggested he did it, because I didn't think it would be any more than a song to accompany the *faux* funeral. Michael wrote the lyrics and Johnny Mandel reworked it, and we liked it so much we used it as the title music. It could have become a hit then, as it did later with the TV series, but none of the record companies wanted to promote a lyric about suicide....

What were your objections to the television series?

Every Sunday night an Asian war was in our living rooms, and no matter what platitudes they came out with, still the bad guys were the dark-skinned, narrow-eyed people. I just thought it was obscene at the time, when we were still in Vietnam. It was the opposite message to what we felt we were making in the film.

I remember at my mother's funeral, this friend of her told me, 'Oh, Mr. Altman, your mother was so proud of you. We see that M*A*S*H every week!'

COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XIII, FALL 2006:

Oct 31 Fred Zinnemann, **The Day of the Jackal** 1973
Nov 7 Emile de Antonio **In the Year of the Pig** 1969
Nov 14 Bob Rafelson, **Five Easy Pieces** 1970
Nov 21 Nicolas Roeg **The Man Who Fell to Earth** 1976
Nov 28 Spike Lee **Do the Right Thing** 1989
Dec 5 Peter Greenaway **Prospero's Books** 1991

COMING UP IN THE UB FORUM ON TORTURE (Wednesdays 5:30-8:00 p.m., Center for the Arts 112, UB North Campus)

10.25 **Bruce Jackson & Newton Garver**

11.01 **Eddo Stern**

11.08 **Nina Felshin**

11.15 **Jennifer Harbury & Ezat Mossallanejad**

For details on topics and speakers go to <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~cgkobel/tor.htm>

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