

The Buffalo Film Seminars



Directed by Robert Altman
Screenplay by Robert Altman and Brian McKay
Based on the novel "McCabe" by Edmund Naughton
Produced by Mitchell Brower and David Foster
Cinematography by Vilmos Zsigmond
Songs by Leonard Cohen: "The Stranger Song", "Sisters of Mercy", "Winter Lady"

Warren Beatty...John McCabe
Julie Christie...Constance Miller
Rene Auberjonois...Sheehan
William Devane...The Lawyer
John Schuck...Smalley
Corey Fischer...Mr. Elliot
Bert Remsen...Bart Coyle
Shelley Duvall...Ida Coyle
Keith Carradine...Cowboy
Michael Murphy...Sears
Antony Holland...Hollander
Hugh Millais...Butler
Manfred Schulz...Kid
Jace Van Der Veen...Breed
Jackie Crossland...Lily
Elizabeth Murphy...Kate
Carey Lee McKenzie...Alma
Thomas Hill...Archer
Linda Sorenson...Blanche
Elisabeth Knight...Birdie
Janet Wright...Eunice
Maysie Hoy...Maisie
Linda Kupecek...Ruth
Jeremy Newson...Jeremy Berg
Wayne Robson...Bartender
Jack Riley...Riley Quinn
Robert Fortier...Town drunk
Wayne Grace...Bartender
Wesley Taylor...Shorty Dunn
Anne Cameron...Mrs. Dunn
Graeme Campbell...Bill Cubbs
J.S. Johnson...J.J.
Joe Clarke...Joe Shortreed
Harry Frazier...Andy Anderson
Edwin Collier...Gilchrist
Terence Kelly...Quigley
Brantley Kearns...Fiddler
Don Francks...Buffalo
Rodney Gage...Sumner Washington
Lili Francks...Mrs. Washington

/March 4, 2008 (XVI:8)

Robert Altman: **McCABE & MRS. MILLER** (1971, 135min.)



Joan Tewkesbury...Townswoman
Harvey Lowe...Townsmen
Eric Schneider...Townsmen
Milos Zatovic...Townsmen
Claudine Melgrave...Townswoman
Derek Keurvorst...Townsmen
Alex Diakun...Townsmen
Gordon Robertson...Townsmen

Robert Altman (20 February 1925, Kansas City, Missouri—20 November 2006, Los Angeles), has developed the form of interlocked narrative to a level that is frequently copied (e.g. Quentin Tarrantino) but never matched. **His bio from Leonard Maltin's Movie Encyclopedia:** "Irreverent, iconoclastic director whose films have won kudos from critics and film buffs for decades, though his box-office hits have been few and far between. His career has had more than its share of ups and downs, but Altman has never "sold out," remaining a maverick at every turn. After serving in World War 2 as a pilot, Altman wrote magazine stories and radio scripts (and even had one story turned into a movie, 1948's *Bodyguard*) before signing on with a small Kansas City company that made industrial films. He spent nearly a decade there before entering the theatrical arena with a lowbudget epic called *The Delinquents* (1957, which he produced and wrote as well as directed). He followed it with a documentary, *The James Dean Story* that same year, which gave him an entree to television, where he became a prolific director of series episodes. Over the next decade he helmed installments of "Alfred Hitchcock Presents," "Combat," and "Bonanza," among others.



Altman's next feature films, *Countdown* (1968) and *That Cold Day in the Park* (1969), elicited some raised-eyebrow comments from critics, but it was *M*A*S*H* (1970), a black comedy about a Korean War medical unit, that cemented his reputation. An irreverent and original film, it solidified techniques he'd experimented with in his earlier work, and also solidified his relationship with a handful of actors who became part of his unofficial stock company. The film earned him an Oscar nomination, and made him bankable in Hollywood, at least temporarily. His revisionist genre pieces *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (a 1971 Western) and *The Long Goodbye* (a 1973 Philip Marlowe whodunit) added to Altman's rapidly expanding prestige, and the underrated *Images* (1972), *Thieves Like Us* and *California Split* (both 1974) reaffirmed his individualistic approach to narrative filmmaking. *Nashville* (1975), a brilliant mosaic of American life set in the country music capital, brought Altman another Academy Award nomination and showed him at the peak of his powers. (Plans to show a much longer version of the film in miniseries form on TV sadly never came to fruition.) It proved a tough act to follow. His subsequent films became increasingly odd and remote. *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976), the fascinating *3 Women* (1977), *A Wedding* (1978), the charming *A Perfect Couple*, *Quintet* and *H.E.A.L.T.H* (all 1979) had flashes of brilliance but seemed to reflect an artist who'd gone astray. Altman's attempt to return to the commercial mainstream resulted in the spectacularly awful *Popeye* (1980). The director retreated and retrenched, directing for the stage and returning to film with an occasional offbeat project: *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982), *Streamers* (1983), *Secret Honor* (1984), *Fool for Love*, *O.C. and Stiggs* (both 1985), *Beyond Therapy* (1987, stupefyingly bad), *Aria* (1988, an omnibus film in which he directed one segment), and *Vincent & Theo* (1990). Television proved a more fruitful medium for him during

the 1980s. Altman directed a handful of plays and small-scale films, as well as the highly praised cinema-verité election campaign parody, "Tanner" (a 1988 cable series that won him an Emmy) on which he collaborated with cartoonist Garry Trudeau. He also directed a first-rate TV production of "The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial" (1988). Then, in 1992, Altman brought Michael Tolkin's sardonic satire of Hollywood deal-making to life for the big screen. *The Player* (1992) restored the director to favor and earned him another Oscar nomination. More important, it reminded longtime fans of the Altman of yore: a challenging and creative filmmaker in full command of his craft. He took time off from films to direct an opera production of "McTeague" before persuading another all-star cast of actors to appear in his three-hour mosaic of Raymond Carver stories, *Short Cuts* (1993), which earned him an Oscar nomination. He then relocated to Paris to film the dismal fashion world satire *Ready to Wear/Prêt-à-Porter* (1994). Altman has influenced many filmmakers, especially his former assistant and protégé Alan Rudolph, for whom he produced *Welcome to L.A.* (1977) and *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* (1994)."

Some of Altman's other films are *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006), *The Company* (2003), *Voltage* (2002), *Gosford Park* (2001), *Dr. T & the Women* (2000), *Cookie's Fortune* (1999), *The Gingerbread Man* (1998), *Kansas City* (1996) and *Brewster McCLOUD* (1970). In 2002, the American Film Institute named him director of the year for *Gosford Park* and in 2006 he was given an Honorary Academy Award. He has been nominated for seven Academy Awards: *Gosford Park* (best director and best picture), *Short Cuts* (director), *The Player* (director), *Nashville* (director and picture), *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*, *Aria*, *Fool for Love*, *3 Women*, and *Images*.

Vilmos Zsigmond (16 June 1930, Szeged, Hungary) has shot 80 films, the most recent of which is *Bolen!*, which is now in post-production. Some of the others were *Cassandra's Dream* (2007), *Melinda and Melinda* (2004), *The Crossing Guard* (1995), *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990), *The Two Jakes* (1990), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), *Heaven's Gate* (1980), *The Rose* (1979), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977; Oscar for best cinematography), *The Sugarland Express* (1974), *Cinderella Liberty* (1973), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Deliverance* (1972), *The Hired Hand* (1971), *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), and *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies!!?* (1964).

Warren Beatty (30 March 1937, Richmond, Virginia,) has appeared in 22 films, the most recent of which was *Town & Country* (2001). Some of the others were *Bulworth* (1998), *Bugsy* (1991), *Dick Tracy* (1990), *Ishitar* (1987), *Reds* (1981), *Heaven Can Wait* (1978), *Shampoo* (1975), *The Parallax View* (1974), *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Mickey*

One (1965), *Lilith* (1964), and *Splendor in the Grass* (1961). Some of the films he produced are *Bulworth*, *Bugsy*, *Dick Tracy*, *Ishtar*, *Reds*, *Heaven Can Wait*, *Shampoo* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. He wrote *Bulworth*, *Love Affair*, *Reds*, *Heaven Can Wait* and *Shampoo*. He directed *Bulworth*, *Dick Tracy* and *Reds*. He won the 2000 Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award. He won Oscars for *Reds* (Best Director, Best Picture, Best Screenplay) and had 8 other Oscar nominations.



Julie Christie (14 April 1941, Chabua, Assam, India) has appeared in 46 films, the most recent of them *Away from Her* (2006), for which she had a best actress Oscar nomination. Some of the others: *Finding Neverland* (2004), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004), *Troy* (2004), *Afterglow* (1997), *Hamlet* (1996), *The Gold Diggers* (1983), *Heat and Dust* (1983), *Heaven Can Wait* (1978), *Don't Look Now* (1973), *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), *Petulia* (1968), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1967), *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), *Darling* (1965), *Young Cassidy* (1965), *Billy Liar* (1963) and *The Fast Lady* (1962). She won a best actress Oscar for *Darling*.

Shelley Duvall (7 July 1949, Houston, Texas) has acted in 49 films and tv series, the most recent of which was *Manna from Heaven* (2002). Some of the others were *Frankenweenie* (1984), *Time Bandits* (1981), *Popeye* (1980), *The Shining* (1980), *Annie Hall* (1977), *3 Women* (1977), *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976), *Nashville* (1975), *Thieves Like Us* (1974), *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), and *Brewster McCloud* (1970).

Keith Carradine (8 August 1949, San Mateo, CA) has acted in 112 films and television programs, the first of which was *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and the most recent of which are *Winter of Frozen Dreams* (in post-production) and *Lake City* (2008, completed). He also appeared in "Dexter," "Complete Savages," "Deadwood," "Arli\$\$," *Wild Bill* (1995), *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle*

(1994), *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (1991), *Madonna: The Immaculate Collection* (1990), *The Long Riders* (1980), *Pretty Baby* (1978), *The Duellists* (1977), *Welcome to L.A.* (1976), *Nashville* (1975), *Thieves Like Us* (1974), and *Emperor of the North Pole* (1973). He won an Oscar for best original score for "I'm Easy" in *Nashville*.

Leonard Cohen (September 21, 1934, Montreal, Quebec) is a Canadian singer-songwriter, poet and novelist. Cohen published his first book of poetry in Montreal in 1956 and his first novel, *Beautiful Losers*, in 1963. His first album was *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, 1968. He is a Companion of the Order of Canada and he will be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame on March 10, 2008.

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 Altman 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 chafed 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 not 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 McCcloud* (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. Not all the material so developed will appear in the completed film, but the process can subtly modify the events on the screen, suggesting that they spring from a context of ongoing, abundant life. And of course it is a style of filmmaking that appeals strongly to many performers. Altman had carried over cast and crew members from *M*A*S*H* to *Brewster McCloud*, assembling a sort of repertory company, and now he moved those people and his stars to a mountain near Vancouver, where they helped build and at times virtually lived in the set for a frontier town of 1902. Warren Beatty plays the braggart McCabe, who prospers by setting up a bordello with the help of an opium-smoking whore named Mrs. Miller, played by Julie Christie. Indeed, McCabe does so well that a large mining corporation decides to buy up his business, and when he cockily refuses to sell, hires three killers to gun him down. As he dodges and stalks these men in the snow, Mr. Miller withdraws into an opium dream.

Altman had said that he wanted “to illustrate a heroic ballad. Yes, these events took place, but not in the way you’ve been told. I wanted to look at it through a different window, you might say, but I still wanted to keep the poetry of the ballad.” The film is a richly-textured mood piece, and although the story suggests that life was cheap on the frontier and that big money (rather than individual enterprise) called the shots, elements of the production impose a distance on these ugly facts.



Cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond, who worked with Altman to achieve a hazy visual effect, explained that “we wanted to have the film look like old photographs, old color photographs. We thought that if they had a camera in those days, and if they had an old type of color film, that’s the way it would have looked. That was one approach; the other approach was the weather. We wanted to shoot the whole story against a very humid, cold muddy background. To create that feeling, we wanted to muddy up the film a little. That means we flashed the film quite heavily and pushed it.” The soundtrack included the rasping romantic ballads

of Leonard Cohen, which some critics found hauntingly right, others, an arty anachronism.

One of the first preview prints of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* contained an error in the optical soundtrack transfer. That and the overlapping voices made the dialogue virtually incomprehensible, and reviewers lambasted the picture. Pauline Kael saw a correct print and praised it as “a beautiful pipe dream of a movie—a fleeting, almost diaphanous vision of what frontier life would have been,” persuading a number of her colleagues to see it again. Many reversed their original appraisals, but the film did not do particularly well at the box office. Nevertheless, it has become one of Altman’s most enduring critical successes. Judith M. Kass calls *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* “the most satisfying of Altman’s films to see and contemplate. It is physically beautiful, it has marvelous performances, and it is realistic about situations and characters who are all too easy to sentimentalize.... The film has none of the annoying cuteness that occasionally mars movies like *M*A*S*H* and *The Long Goodbye*, and none of the deliberate archness that detracts from *Brewster McCloud* and *Images*.”

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 biting, 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.

Like Bergman, Altman has worked often with a stock company of performers who appear in one role after another, among them Elliott Gould, Sally Kellerman, Rene Auberjonois, Keith Carradine, Shelley Duvall, Michael Murphy, Bert Remsen, and Henry Gibson.

Altman’s distinctive style transforms whatever subject he approaches. He often takes advantage of widescreen compositions in which the frame is filled with a number of subjects and details that complete for the spectator’s attention. Working with cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond, he has achieved films that are visually distinguished and tend toward the atmospheric. Especially notable are the use of the zoom lens in the smoky cinematography of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*; the reds, whites and blues of *Nashville*; the constantly mobile camera, specially mounted, of *The Long Goodbye*, which so effortlessly reflects the hazy moral center of the world the film presents; and the pastel prettiness of *A Wedding*, particularly the first appearance of that icon of the American cinema, Lillian Gish, whose subsequent filmic death propels the narrative.

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*.

Altman on Altman Ed. David Thompson. Faber and Faber, London, 2006

Whenever Robert Altman is asked about his philosophy of film-making, his answer is usually along these lines: “It’s the doing that’s the important thing. I equate film-making with

making 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 that you made is in everybody's memories, and that's it. You all start walking home, and somebody 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 making 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....

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 allow himself to roam free, drifting around a scene like a bloodhound following the 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.

And what of Altman's actual preoccupations? These have always been harder to pin down, since by his own account so many of his projects have seemingly come about through serendipity. But often he has revealed his keen eye for the essence of the American character and has brilliantly undermined empty

myths, be they of the glory of the Old West, the earnest homilies of country-and-western music or the splendour of wealth.

McCabe & Mrs. Miller
McCabe was a novel by Edmund Naughton published in 1959. Producer David Foster owned the rights and brought the project to Altman, who assigned his sometime associate Brian McKay to write a script. Altman's suggestion for the title was *The Presbyterian Church Wager*, but everyone else felt it was too confusing a description of the film.

McCabe & Mrs. Miller was described at the time of its release by John Wayne as 'corrupt'. It looks like no Western made before and few since.

With every film, it's like, 'Come, look through my window, the way it looks from here is the way it looks to me. And this may not be any more the truth than the truth from over there. But just look through my window....' That was my plan with *McCabe*. I certainly didn't do the film for the story. I thought this was great —'This story, everyone knows it, I don't have to deal with it.' The hero was a blustering kind of second banana, a gambler who was a loser. There was the whore with the heart of gold, and the heavies were the giant, the half-breed and the kid. So everybody knows the movie, those characters and the plot, which means they're comfortable with it and gives them an anchor. And I can really deal with the background.

Something was in my mind than that I've never been able to find out about, but I saw a western picture either when I was a kid or later, maybe on television. It's like the way certain memories persist—it was a cowboy picture with all these streets and tall buildings with flat-board fronts. It didn't look like any Western town I'd seen, there weren't a lot of horses around. I remember a guy walking across and entering a doorway, and it was just different, somehow very real. That really impressed me. It could have been a dream, it could have been anything.

Vilmos Szigmond's photography has an unusual, yellowish tone to it. Wasn't that achieved by flashing the film—exposing it to light before it was developed?

Yes, it was a big risk, probably silly. But it was the only way you could get that effect, as they didn't have the post-treatment of film you have now so it can be done after the fact. And by doing it on the negative, the studio would have no choice but to accept it. My main reason for doing that, which I also did in *The Long Goodbye*, was I was doing everything to destroy the clarity of the film. including using a heavy number three fog filter. I wanted it to have that antique, historical look, which you could do with black and white, but I asked, 'Why was that more effective?' Because if you're dealing with the truth, which is colour, since no one sees in black and white, why is that not as real? So I really set out to make it look like those old photographs do.

That look was also in the town you created specifically for the film.

The whole film was shot about forty miles from Vancouver. There was already a dilapidated town there, with a rooming house for the people who worked in the saw mills. We continued to build up the town as we were shooting. We started with the saloon on the bridge, and as the picture opens you see the mines and other buildings going up—the bathhouse, the whorehouse and the church.

Leon Ericksen is just the most brilliant designer I've ever worked with. I work very closely with the production designer. I don't want part of a set; I want an arena in which whatever we're going to do can take place. So only on rare occasions when there are budget problems will I accept the request, 'Can we build this room with just three walls?' Usually I say 'I don't think so. I want the whole environment, because when I arrive there and the actors arrive there, I don't know how I'll want to shoot it. And I may just want to turn around and shoot the other way.' So I always prefer to have the complete atmosphere you get from a complete set, a room with walls on all sides and a ceiling and a floor, windows, and so on.

The costumes in McCabe are not what you usually expect in a western.

I told Warner Brothers to send up a truckload of period western clothes, because I wanted it to be as if I were making an immigration film. It had occurred to me that cowboys didn't wear those hats we're familiar with from so many pictures. Almost nobody who conquered the west was American; they were first-generation immigrants from Italy, Ireland, France, England, Holland, most of the northern countries. They spoke with Swedish accents, Irish accents, Italian accents. They certainly didn't all sound like George Bush from Texas—I mean, that came years later. And they came with their silverware, their knife, fork and spoon, items of clothing and watches, all from Europe and finely crafted there. And the clothes were the same as they wore in Europe. So the only cowboy hat I put on anybody was the one on Keith Carradine's character.

I'm convinced that the reason people made Westerns with everybody wearing those cowboy hats was because that's what they saw from the photographs of the time. But we found out that a photographic plate at the time was so expensive that you would have a photographer in his shop, and when he hears that some guy's just ridden into town wearing the funniest hat you've ever seen, he just had to take a picture of him. And that's the record of the time that's passed down.

There's no question that the actors look very authentic in their clothes.

I got all the actors out one morning on location and told them all to pick out their wardrobe. I said, 'You all get one pair of pants, a pair of boots, two shirts, one jacket, a vest or a sweater, and one hat. Then you go to the prop department and there's stuff to pick up there like silverware.' You could tell a lot about the actor by the character of the clothes they selected. The more experienced the actors, the more they went for the character clothes. I remember Rene Auberjonois picked the most torn, ratty kind of stuff, so he looked like a ragman. Then I told them, 'Now, over there are needles and thread and patches, because you're living here during the winter, these are the only clothes you have and you wouldn't last twenty minutes with a hole in your sleeve. You'd freeze. So sew them up!' For two days everybody was sitting there repairing their wardrobe. But the message came through that there was a

reality to what it was; it wasn't just a wrapping. It gave them a focus and a unity emerged from that.

Apart from Warren and Julie, most of the actors were people I'd used in *M*A*S*H* and *Brewster McCLOUD* or they were local. The three girls who played the Bear Paw whores were local girls, and many of the guys working as carpenters on the set were put in wardrobe and became extras.

The whole film has a real feeling for the period, with all its cruelty and desperation.

The whole idea was that in 1901, in the north-west territory, you



would find in the law books that the maximum fine for first-degree murder of a Chinaman was \$50! If you were tried and convicted, of course. It was considered the same as if you were shooting a dog. And I was really interested in the truth about opium. The Canadians brought the Chinese in to build their railroads. They wouldn't let any women come in; they had a head tax on women. So these guys were working like mules for fifteen years to earn enough money to go back and buy a bride. Instead of allowing them women, they imported and kept them supplied with opium. The opium, although it was illegal in Canada and the US, was taxed at \$150 a barrel by the Canadian government. But it was made available to the Chinese, because it kept their libido down. It's on record that when there was a particularly tough mine face—and we included this in the movie—they sent the dynamite down with the Chinese workers and it would go boom, the tunnel opened, and you had ten dead Chinks.

We planned the film along these lines, and that's why I dealt so much with all the people in that town. Which pissed Warren off.

It's been widely reported that Warren Beatty didn't really enjoy your methods.

I don't think Warren would be happy with *anybody's* methods. That's him. He wasn't happy with *McCabe*; he didn't like the way I mixed it, that you couldn't hear every word, with a lot of things. It was scary for him because he hadn't done that before and he wasn't used to it. Yet he was the one who sought me out for the film. He chased the picture; I didn't go after him to do it. He was great in *McCabe*—the film would not be what it is without him—and he contributed a lot of dialogue, and he's the one that put the gold tooth in. But he just isn't much fun to work with. He's kind of a control freak and he can't let go because he's

a director, a producer and as the last movie star of an era. The best thing he did was to bring Julie Christie in. These affairs of the heart help. Sometimes they're better than the film, you know—I got to do the picture, but I had to use the girl.' But this girl was better than *he* was.

For the first take, Warren simply wouldn't act. He was cautiously putting himself through it, because he knew he was going to do it eighteen, twenty times. I'll always do a scene twice, just because it takes so long to set the goddamn thing up! But you don't know yourself how it's going to be. But after three or four takes, I've seen what it is and I will say, 'I'm happy with this, unless you think you can do better.' 'Oh yeah, give me another one.' It's in their heads often. And I'll always give them another one or two, but if nothing happens, I'll stop there. I won't shoot many, many takes unless there's some technical thing wrong. I usually end up using one of the first two or three. Julie is one of those intuitive actresses and was good right away, while Warren wouldn't be doing it until at least take four. He seriously got progressively better. But as he was getting better, she was diminishing. So you cut it in the middle, but you don't have the best of either of their performances.

In the scene where Warren has a soliloquy while loading his gun, we went to take seven. I remember it was about 10 o'clock at night and I said, 'That's great, Warren, we've got this really good.' And he said, 'I don't think so. I'll do another one.' Then we got up to take nine, and Warren said, 'Which one do you like?' I said, 'I don't know, I've got take three circled, and take five, and take seven.' 'Well, which one do you like?' I said, 'I can't remember, Warren. I've seen it so many times nothing's surprising me, so I'm not a good judge.' So he wanted another and then another. And then I turned to my assistant director, Tommy Thompson, and said, 'I'm going to go to bed. Stay with Warren, let him shoot as many takes as he wants, and I'll see you guys tomorrow.' I thought that would shame him, but no, he went on and did another seven more takes. And I think we used take three or five!

In *McCabe* particularly I shot individual close-ups of everybody, and a lot of the cutting is forced by that. In *Gosford Park* and *The Company*, I don't think I shot close-up of *anybody*, unless it was just the only thing to do. But we're all imitating something we've seen before—even if it's done a little bit differently, the basis of it is still there. I don't think anything is really original. Veins coming off of arteries are different, that's all. Everything I've done has been drawn from something else, even if it's just an impression. What other references do we have except for what we've seen? I'm just not original enough; I don't have an original mind that way. I'm more of an adaptor. If I see something I think, 'Oh, we can do it this way. Once I've got set on my track I'll follow it.'

The final scene in the snow is beautifully sustained, and I've heard that most of the flakes we see falling are the real thing. We had shot everything else, and we were shooting the scene where Julie crosses the bridge at night. Then these big snow flakes, the size of breakfast cereal, started to fall and it turned really cold. I found out it was something like 28 degrees F. So we stayed up all night and ran the hosepipes we used to create rain so that we could freeze everything. The next morning, everything looked beautiful, with icicles everywhere, like fairyland. But Warren didn't want to come out of his trailer. He wouldn't get into his costume. He said, 'What are we going to do? We're going to go out in the snow and shoot some stuff, and then it's going to

melt and it'll be gone, and then we're going to have to start over again.' I said, 'What *else* are we going to do? We have nothing left to shoot. Let's go and try and work fast, and if we get busted out, we do.' And finally he agreed. And it continued to snow for eight days...

The other thing was it wasn't just that it snowed; it was really deep. If you walked twenty yards and looked around, there would be no footprints. We were able to move equipment around, go into places, and we still had that 'virgin snow' look. So we went right up to the limit, and the minute we finished that final chase, when Warren died and they went to put the fire out in the church, the snow just started to melt. And in two days it was gone. So that was really good fortune.

The soundtrack of McCabe & Mrs. Miller daringly used just three songs from the Canadian poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen's first album, Songs of Leonard Cohen—'Winter Lady', 'Sisters of Mercy' and 'The Stranger Song'. They fit the mood of the film so beautifully, it's as if they were written for the film.

I knew when I was shooting the movie that I didn't want a conventional western movie score. So I had those old songs on the player-piano in the whorehouse, and that furnished some music. One of the characters who hung around the saloon was a violinist, so I used him at times to score things. Then I had an Indian guy with a flute, but I don't think I used him in the end... I never knew exactly what the music should be, but I knew I didn't want strings and horns in a background score. When I finished with the movie I went to Paris for about ten days with Tommy Thompson. During that time we went to a party at somebody's apartment. I didn't know anybody there, everybody was speaking French, and on the hi-fi was the first Leonard Cohen album.

Let me cut back to Vancouver several years before when I was shooting *That Cold Day in the Park*. I lived in a house with my editor Danny Greene and Brian McKay, who was then one of my assistants. That first Leonard Cohen album had come out, and I was just crazy about it. We'd come home in the rain to eat dinner and we'd put that record on so often we wore out two copies! We'd just get stoned and play that stuff. Then I forgot all about it through the next movies. When I walked into that apartment and heard that music, I said, 'Shit, that's my movie!' So I called the editor, Lou Lombardo, and said, 'Get hold of that Leonard Cohen album, transfer all those songs, and I'll be back in a couple of days.'

I literally left Paris within two days, and back in the cutting room we put those songs on the picture and they fitted like a glove. I think the reason they worked was because those lyrics were etched in my subconscious, so when I shot the scenes I fitted them to the songs, as if they were written for them. But it had never occurred to me to use them, because this was not the kind of music you would put to a picture like that. I put in about ten of them at first—of course, we way overdid it—and then we ended up with the three songs that were finally used, and I thought they were just wonderful. I think that's a pretty accurate and truthful story.

I didn't know Leonard then, and when I told Warners what I wanted to do, they said, 'No, he's with Columbia, so we can't get those, but we have guys who do the same kind of thing.' So I got on the phone to Leonard Cohen—I found him in Nashville—and I said, 'Hi, my name is Robert Altman,' and he said, 'Oh, my god, just a minute!' Then he turned to whoever he was with and said, 'Honey, I've got Robert Altman on the phone, can you believe it?' He said he was a great fan of mine, and I told

him that I was a great fan of his. He said he didn't like *M*A*S*H* so much but *BrewsterMcCloud* was the best picture ever. I told him what I wanted to do, and he said it was not a problem. He not only arranged it for me—for next to nothing, minimal rates-but he made the record company do a deal with Warners that the day the picture was released, if there were any profits from his album after that date, some of it went to us. That's just unheard of, but that's the way it should be.

What was Cohen's reaction to the film?

I had an assembly of the movie in New York, and I got Leonard and his new manager to come to a screening room to show it to him, as I need him to play some guitar transitions for me. We ran the picture and there wasn't a great deal of enthusiasm for it, which was kind of funny. But he went into the studio and called me that night and said, 'I've just finished those guitar pieces. They've been sent to you, but I do have to tell you that I don't like this picture very much.' I said, 'I'm really disappointed.' He said, 'I'm not for the picture, though I agreed for my music to be used.' And that broke my heart. It just sent me down to the bottom floor.

A year later I was doing *Images*. I was living in a house in London which Johnny Williams had rented when he was doing *Fiddler on the Roof*. We were preparing to go to Ireland, and the phone rang, and it was Leonard Cohen. He said, 'Bob, I just saw

McCabe & Mrs Miller, and I think it's absolutely fantastic. I love it.' And that took the weight of the world off my shoulders! I said, 'I can't tell you what this means to me.' He said, 'I don't know what was wrong with me. I was being pressured by my new management, blah blah blah.' But it made me feel better.

As I understand it, the first prints shown of McCabe & Mrs Miller had to be done in Canada, and they muddied the picture and sound too much.

McCabe was not a success when it opened—people said they couldn't understand the dialogue and they didn't get the tone of it. Ten years later, it suddenly popped up and became a minor classic, or what they call a 'cult movie'. But for me, a cult is not enough people to make up a minority!

COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2008 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS:

Mar 18 Hal Ashby BEING THERE (1982)*

Mar 25 Sydney Pollack TOOTSIE (1982)

Apr 1 Krzysztof Kieslowski THE DOUBLE LIFE OF VERONIQUE (1991)

Apr 8 Jane Campion THE PIANO (1993)

Apr 15 Clint Eastwood UNFORGIVEN (1992)

Apr 22 Ingmar Bergman THE SEVENTH SEAL (1957)

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