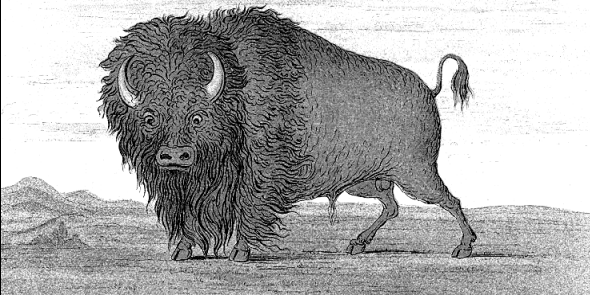


The Buffalo Film Seminars



Conversations about great films with Diane Christian and Bruce Jackson

April 16, 2002: V/12



ROBERT ALTMAN (20 February 1925, Kansas City, Missouri), has 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*. 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), *MASH* (director). He has twice won the Golden Palm for best picture at Cannes –for *The Player* and *MASH* – and he's been nominated for Kansas City, Aria, Fool for Love, 3 Women, and *Images*.

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 *MASH* (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-

NASHVILLE (1975, 159 min.)

Directed & produced by Robert Altman
 Written by Joan Tewkesbury
 Original music by Arlene Barnett, Jonnie Barnett, Karen Black, Ronee Blakley, Gary Busey, Keith Carradine, Juan Grizzle, Allan F. Nicholls, Dave Peel, Joe Raposo
 Cinematography by Paul Lohmann
 Film Editors Dennis M. Hill and Sidney Levin
 Sound recorded by Chris McLaughlin
 Sound editor William A. Sawyer
 Original lyrics Robert Altman, Henry Gibson, Ben Raleigh, Richard Reichag, Lily Tomlin
 Political campaign designer....Thomas Hal Phillips

David Arkin.... Norman
 Barbara Baxley.... Lady Pearl
 Ned Beatty.... Delbert Reese
 Karen Black... Connie White
 Ronee Blakley.... Barbara Jean
 Timothy Brown Tommy Brown
 Keith Carradine.... Tom Frank
 Geraldine Chaplin.... Opal
 Robert DoQui.... Wade Cooley
 Shelley Duvall.... L. A. Joan
 Allen Garfield... Barnett
 Henry Gibson.... Haven Hamilton
 Scott Glenn.... Private First Class Glenn Kelly
 Jeff Goldblum.... Tricycle Man
 Barbara Harris.... Albuquerque
 David Hayward ... Kenny Fraiser
 Michael Murphy... John Triplett
 Allan F. Nicholls.... Bill
 Dave Peel.... Bud Hamilton
 Cristina Raines.... Mary
 Bert Remsen.... Star
 Lily Tomlin... Linnea Reese
 Gwen Welles ... Sueleen Gay
 Keenan Wynn.... Mr. Green
 James Dan Calvert... Jimmy Reese
 Donna Denton... Donna Reese
 Merle Kilgore... Trout
 Carol McGinnis.... Jewel
 Sheila Bailey.... Smokey Mountain Laurel
 Patti Bryant.... Smokey Mountain Laurel
 Richard Baskin.... Frog
 Jonnie Barnett... Himself
 Vassar Clements.... Himself
 Sue Barton.... Herself
 Elliott Gould... Himself
 Julie Christie... Herself
 Robert L. DeWeese Jr.... Mr. Green
 Gailard Sartain... Man at Lunch Counter
 Howard K. Smith... Himself

Academy Award for Best Music, Song: Keith Carradine, "I'm Easy"
 Selected for the National Film Registry by the National Film Preservation Board

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 *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)

JOAN TEWKESBURY wrote one other Altman film *Thieves like Us*. Most of her other writing credits are for television films and series. Most of PAUL LOHMANN's cinematography has been on made-for-tv films, the last of them "Secrets" in 1992. He also did several feature films, among them *Looker* (1981), *Mommie Dearest* (1981), *Hide in Plain Sight* (1980), *North Dallas Forty* (1979), *Meteor* (1979), *Time After Time* (1979), *High Anxiety* (1977), *The White Buffalo* (1977), *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976), *Silent Movie* (1976), and *California Split* (1974).

DENNIS M. HILL most recently edited *National Lampoon's Van Wilder* (2002). He also edited Altman's *H.E.A.L.T.H.*, *Quintet*, *3 Women*, and *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson*. Some of the other films edited by SIDNEY LEVIN are *Scenes of the Crime* (2001), *Guarding Tess* (1994), *Stanley & Iris* (1990), *The River* (1984), *Cross Creek* (1983), *Norma Rae* (1979), *The Cheap Detective* (1978), *The Front* (1976), *Hit Lady* (1974) (TV), *Mean Streets* (1973), and *Sounder* (1972).

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

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.

The James Dean Story Warner Brothers attempt to cash in on the burgeoning cult surrounding the dead star . . . 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.

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.

With just a few days of shooting left [on *Countdown* 1968 about the moonshot], Jack Warner asked to see the footage Altman had assembled. He was appalled by its length and the overlapping dialogue, and fired the director.

More than a dozen directors had turned this [*M*A*S*H* (1970)] 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.

Pauline Kael called *M*A*S*H* "the best American war comedy since sound came in," and most critics concurred. The film . . . 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. . . . 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.

Brewster McCloud (1970) was a failure at the box office. . . 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."

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 areas 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 disenchanting 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.

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

from *Robert Altman*. Gerard Plecki. Twayne, Boston 1985.

Nashville is the highpoint of Robert Altman's film career. Clearly his most controversial film, *Nashville* was also his most successful gamble. He developed innovative production techniques to relate a story based on twenty-four major characters. With its explosive political content, *Nashville* altered the tradition of the conservative film musical, demanding much of its viewers and offering no easy

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. . . .

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."

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 film 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*.

interpretations.

Consistent with Altman's later films, *Nashville* examined the widespread presence of apathy and complacency in American culture. The tone of *Nashville*, however, is not hostility, but objectivity. *Nashville* does not advocate an explicit ideological perspective, but it does suggest the need for a moral awakening of

the United States.

Nashville was filmed on location in the summer of 1974 on a \$3 million budget. The film was shot in sequence, so for those seven weeks the entire cast and crew camped at a Nashville motel. The film was in every way a risky, communal undertaking, with the director acting as a combined authority figure/summer-camp counselor. He took the cast on a bus "to every location we picked, so they had a physical feeling of what the space was. Improvisations of dialogue occurred during rehearsals. Individual and group discussions of scenes and script continued through out the filming. Daily rushes were viewed by all members of the *Nashville* family.

The innovative technical use of eight-track and Chemtone processes complemented the unorthodox shooting style of *Nashville*. Lion's Gate Eight-Track Sound System was refined from a concept that Jim Webb and Chris McLaughlin originated during the filming of *California Split*. The system recorded or "mixed" multiple-sourced live sound from separate microphones within and outside the frame. Since the sound was transmitted on microwave, Altman no longer needed mike booms and umbilical microphones. The camera could therefore be placed virtually anywhere he desired, permitting a wider shot selection, more camera movement, and varying angles of approach.

The sounds system also eliminated the need for postdubbing, which typically deadens any sound effect. Since all sound was recorded separately and synchronously during the shooting, it was unnecessary to add sounds to match the action during the editing stages. The authenticity, clarity, and immediacy of sound recording in *Nashville* remains unparalleled.

The complexity of sound enriched the smooth development of the narrative in *Nashville*. Overlapping dialogue, sound effects, and background commentary effectively utilized all sound tracks, so sixteen additional tracks were added for recording the songs and background music. This addition provided still greater freedom for Altman since there was always enough background "noise" to establish a sensible transition between visually disparate scenes.

Altman would tolerate no studio intrusion in determining the length of *Nashville*, a film he once described as "my Grand Hotel," so it was released exactly as he desired.

Nashville is carefully structured around specific characterizations. The film is not a compilation of vignettes lacking an overall plan; but throughout the film, plot is subordinate to character development. There are two distinct narrative modes affecting character interactions in the film. First, all characters encounter and respond to the political and personal manipulations of John Triplette. The Walker public-relations man influences the lives of each of the twenty-three other characters, and eventually they all accede to his wishes. Altman adds a second layer of structure to the film by

Next week, April 23, in the BFS it's Martin Scorsese's **MEAN STREETS** (1973) :Harvey Keitel and Robert de Niro enact Scorsese's vision of the Little Italy of his youth. **MEAN STREETS** is a film about crime as ordinary work, as sin. Brilliant dialog (much of it improvised by the actors), camerawork, and acting. Selected for the National Film Registry. Then, on April 30, we close out BFS V with Billy Wilder's **SOME LIKE IT HOT** (1959). After that, you're on your own Tuesday nights until August 27. Our fall schedule is still being put together, so we welcome suggestions. Send us an e mail at bjackson@buffalo.edu or engdc@acsu.buffalo.edu.

And visit <http://buffaloreport.com>....

grouping the characters into smaller sets of discrete alliances. *Nashville* shows us familial, sexual, and professional relationship in various stages of dissolution, depicting the characters' pathetic movement from initial liaisons to inevitable rejections and estrangements.

Nashville combines its disparaging political commentary with a satiric examination of the chaotic country-western scene. Music promotion and campaign practices appear equally contemptible; political platforms and song lyrics become indistinguishable. The film argues that politics and the entertainment industry have become two sides of the same coin.

The *Nashville* politicians and stars seem determined to prove that no one ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American public.

The complacent acceptance of violence is a striking index of the decadence of society in *Nashville*. . .

Later, when Barbara Jean is shot at the Parthenon rally, Haven shouts amidst the sirens and screaming of the crowd, "They can't do this to us here in Nashville!"

Haven's philosophy conveys Altman's argument that "we can accept the assassination of the politician but not of the girl. Because we *condone* political assassination in our culture. We say that's all right, we understand that." Haven's objection reveals *Nashville's* primary goal: to describe a morally revolting and abusive social, political, and economic climate in America, which, if unchecked, will lead to the country's self-destruction.

Nashville's excoriating vision of complacency in American life and its widescale attack on hypocrisy continually break through the film's freewheeling, high-spirited, song-and-dance facade.

Such actively hostile views of American life and society had never surfaced in the musical genre. In the past fifteen years, dissidence and criticism of society had infiltrated and reshaped other genres of American film, but throughout this reorientation the film musical held its ground, impervious to changing times. . . . Altman had previously surprised viewers with his reversal of the stereotypes found in the western and private-eye film; in doing so, he anticipated a trend in filmmaking that reflected an increased dissatisfaction with genre conventions. Similarly, *Nashville* works contrary to stereotypic audience expectations for a musical.

The film musical always functioned to revitalize an already beleaguered culture. *Singin' in the Rain* came closest to examining hypocritical American attitudes. But in *Singin' in the Rain*, as in *A Star is Born*, cynicism and disillusionment reflected some personal failing in an individual, some isolated flaw, such as an unhappy childhood or an unnatural jealousy. The analysis of the film industry in *Singin' in the Rain* merely provides "comic mileage" for Kelly and Donen.

THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS ARE PRESENTED BY THE MARKET ARCADE FILM & ARTS CENTER &



University at Buffalo The State University of New York