

“It’s OK with me”

Introducing Robert Altman

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On March 5, 2006, Robert Altman (1925–2006) received an honorary Oscar at the 78th Academy Awards for “a career that has repeatedly reinvented the art form and inspired filmmakers and audience alike.” A visibly frail, though equally impervious, Altman was introduced by Lily Tomlin and Meryl Streep, two of the stars of his next and final movie, *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006). Their rambling and affectionate dialogue provided a neat summation of some of the key and most identifiable qualities and features of Altman’s distinctive, challenging and sometimes iconoclastic work. It also provided a “greatest hits” account of Altman’s career that had trouble embracing and encompassing its full scope and ill-fitting shape. *MASH* (1970), *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Thieves Like Us* (1974), *California Split* (1974), *Nashville* (1975), *Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982), *The Player* (1992), *Short Cuts* (1993), *Kansas City* (1996) and *Gosford Park* (2001), were the films mentioned. Although this list does contain a number of films that failed to meet with commercial or even significant critical success, it is, in hindsight, a fairly common and canonical listing of the director’s significant contributions to American cinema. Aside from throwing in his most consciously “autobiographical” work, the underrated *Kansas City*, it is a list that fails to adequately account for the troughs, tributaries and tribulations of Altman’s career across industrial filmmaking, network and cable television, major studio productions and art-house projects. Altman’s gracious acceptance, after failing to be awarded an Oscar for Best Director following five nominations across 30 years, is also somewhat incongruous in the context of his often combative and dismissive relationship with the commercial nature, storytelling forms and, even,

history of Hollywood. It therefore feels a little odd to open this companion to Altman's cinema with a discussion of one of the key markers of mainstream or popular critical success. Nevertheless, this late career moment does provide a brilliant illustration of the complex relationship that existed between Altman, the commercial film industry, Hollywood, film criticism and the United States itself. It also illuminates the increasingly affectionate regard in which Altman was held by Hollywood in the final phase of his life and career, and the director's ultimate, if circumspect acceptance of this role and legacy.

In response to Tomlin and Streep's introduction, and its often delightful approximation of the overlapping flow and scripted improvisation of a typically Altmanesque "conversation," Altman exclaimed:

Of course, I was happy and thrilled to accept this award, and I look at it as a nod to all of my films. Because to me, I've just made one long film. And I know some of you have liked some of the sections and others of you.... Anyway, [it's] all right. (Zuckoff 2009, 499)

But it is unlikely that the Academy itself saw the award as "nod to all" of Altman's films. His career is littered with works that ended up scaring producers and appalling studio executives, ranging from his first Hollywood feature, *Countdown* (1968), which reputedly enraged Jack Warner and may have led to the director's removal from the project (Altman in Thompson 2006, 38), the typically willful and obscure follow-up to the monumentally successful *MASH*, *Brewster McCloud* (1970), and the consciously Bergmanesque *Images* (1972), to the all-but-unreleased *Health* (1980) and *O. C. and Stiggs* (1987), the massive financial failure of the expensive Paul Newman "vehicles" *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976) and *Quintet* (1979), and such 1990s films as *Prêt-à-Porter* (1994), *Kansas City* and the incongruous John Grisham adaptation, *The Gingerbread Man* (1998).

The wonder of Altman's career and his resilient reputation was his ability to keep producing work no matter the critical and commercial response to his earlier or immediately prior creations. Also remarkable were the seemingly endless array of producers, financiers, studios (of various sizes and configurations) and collaborators who wanted to work with him despite the general lack of commercial success that met the overwhelming majority of his 37 feature films. Justin Wyatt (1996) has provided a fascinating and now seminal account of the deflating, even disastrous box office performance of Altman's films, while also highlighting the director's mercurial ability to survive across the various strata of the film and television industries, retain and reinvigorate critical attention, and present himself as a distinctive and marketable "auteur":

Alienated from both the major studios and the major independents, Altman illustrates the thorny intersection between cinema and authorship through a career

decisively shaped by the diverse economic forces and industrial concerns which have defined Hollywood cinema for the last three decades. (65)

More commonly, Altman is conceived as an art film director who worked within and *around* the commercial American film industry. This is the central premise of Robert T. Self's (2002) important and ongoing work on the form, style and narrative organization of the director's cinema: "Altman's films ask to be read in a constant tension with the dominant process of American filmmaking across the last three decades of the twentieth century" (xvii).

But Altman's comments to the Academy are also a little misleading in other ways. Despite the fact that his work is often extremely distinctive and clearly identifiable, encompassing an audiovisual style characterized by a constantly moving and shifting frame (often enhanced by the use of multiple cameras), interweaving characters and plotlines, a restless pulling between and across various points of focus and attention (Figure 1.1), a cacophonous soundtrack often captured on copious microphones, and an often audacious combination of realism and heightened artifice, it ought never be described as constituting "one long film". As I will go on to outline below, Altman's work shifts across genres, interior and exterior spaces, subjective and objective states, panoramic, mosaic or networked narrative forms and more intimate chamber dramas, buddy films and goofy comedies.

Although Altman's work is most commonly set in the contemporary moment, he also made film and television productions within specific genres that are preoccupied by the past (such as *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*), lightly periodized war films that adapt literary properties set during World War II (1988's *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial*), and in Korea (*MASH*) and Vietnam (1983's *Streamers*), and a particularly revealing suite of movies that revisit the 1930s: *Thieves Like Us*, *Kansas City* and *Gosford Park*.



Figure 1.1 Barbara Jean (Ronee Blakley) arrives at the airport in *Nashville* (1975) directed by Robert Altman, produced by American Broadcasting Corporation, Paramount Pictures.

These last three films are particularly resonant or revealing as they reflect upon, even if indirectly, the cultural, historical and psycho-geographical terrain of Altman's formative years in Kansas City as a young child and teenager (though we should always be careful when attempting to read any of Altman's work autobiographically). Altman's attempt to describe his output as literally a single "body of work" also fails to account for his "formative" work in the 1950s and 1960s. His status as the "insider's outsider," or vice versa, a maverick who managed to create a vast array of work in the dominant forms and genres of American cinema and television, was further highlighted by the film that surprisingly took home the major honor that night in early March 2006: *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004), an ensemble, race-baiting narrative set within the tangled web of contemporary Los Angeles that clearly betrayed and demonstrated an ongoing debt to Altman.

Finding Altman

As I have indicated above, it isn't easy to know where to start with Altman. My own formative and disparate experiences of Altman's work range from a suburban film society screening in Melbourne of the ensemble-based *A Wedding* (1978) when I was a teenager in the early 1980s, initial viewings on VHS and television of the 1970s works severely impaired by the quality and size of the image and the use of pan-and-scan, and an awareness that the phenomenally popular TV series *M*A*S*H* was based on an earlier, racier model (*MASH* was actually the first film I ever watched on home video). These encounters left me less aware of the aesthetic qualities and accomplishments of Altman's cinema than a sense of their "immediate" texture, their atmosphere and approach to the behavior of actors and characters. I'd also trace my increasing critical fascination with Altman to a repertory viewing of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* some time in the 1980s, a film festival screening of *Tanner '88* in Melbourne in the early 1990s, a late-night encounter with *Vincent & Theo* (1990) on commercial television, and a train ride from Paris to Brussels in the early 1990s in the unexpected company of one of Altman's two French-Canadian cinematographers (this enjoyable but truly chance encounter is now somewhat vague in my memory, but I think it was Pierre Mignot). It took some time, therefore, for me to come to Altman.

These somewhat random encounters reflect the shape-shifting identity and nature of Altman's often unkempt or unruly films and the ways in which we might encounter them. As David Thomson (2002) has argued:

Whether from confusion or density, Altman is that rarity in American cinema: a problem director, a true object of controversy, and a man whose films alter or shift at different viewings like shot silk. (13)

In the process of putting this book together I have revisited many of Altman's films, television episodes and more ephemeral works (including the shorts he made in the mid-1960s like the very playful, cannabis-themed "home movie," *Pot au feu* [1965]). This viewing has reinforced some of my problematically entrenched opinions (I still think *The Long Goodbye* is the director's crowning achievement), but it has also confirmed the quixotic nature of Altman's work and the basic difficulties one encounters when trying to adequately describe, summarize, evaluate or define it.

Altman is one of the most distinctive and contentious filmmakers to rise to prominence in what is now commonly regarded as the "golden era" of New Hollywood cinema in the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s. Widely regarded as a true maverick, iconoclast and independent, Altman nevertheless has a fascinating relationship to dominant trends in studio and mainstream filmmaking, film studies as an academic and critical discipline, and the career narratives of such "contemporaries" as Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola. Despite the fact that Altman is normally given pride of place in the list of filmmakers who rose to full prominence in the 1970s, and during the few brief years of "possibility" and studio experimentation that existed prior to the arrival, at least in most conventional accounts of the era, of such juggernauts as *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) and *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), he actually belongs to an earlier generation who mostly emerged from television in the late 1950s and early 1960s: Arthur Penn, Sidney Lumet, John Frankenheimer, Sam Peckinpah, *et al.*

Many accounts of Altman's career start with a discussion of his breakthrough Hollywood film, the massive box office success *MASH*, and fail to take account of his long "apprenticeship" in industrial filmmaking (for the Calvin Company in his home town of Kansas City), low-budget regional feature-film-making (*The Delinquents*, produced in Kansas City in 1957), network television (working on a huge range of series for various networks and studios over ten years including *Bus Stop*, *Whirlybirds*, *Bonanza*, *Combat!*, *The Roaring 20's* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, and amassing well over 100 directorial credits), and his early, faltering work in Hollywood, as a mostly unsuccessful story writer in the 1940s (though he did receive a credit on Richard Fleischer's *Bodyguard* in 1948) and then as a jobbing contract feature director in the late 1960s: *Countdown* and, arguably, *MASH*. Rather than being a mere prelude to Altman's mature work, a largely dismissive approach to his career in television and industrials that was often reinforced and articulated by the filmmaker himself, this experience in the hyper-industrialized, explicitly commercial and streamlined world of television and corporate filmmaking provided a central impetus to and influence upon his approach to genre, narrative and technical and technological innovation throughout his career, and his reliance on "formulas" that allow for variation, limited improvisation, innovation and increasingly willful digression. It can be argued that his upbringing in Kansas City in the 1930s (a city

somewhat immune to the deeper privations of the Depression and central to the development of “swing” music), and his exposure to the popular culture of that era through radio, cinema and jazz, had a significant effect on the direction of Altman’s future work and its approach to modern American life. This “apprenticeship” also established Altman’s reputation as a hard working but often abrasive director who was commonly in dispute with producers and the various studios he worked for. Therefore, the pattern for Altman’s subsequent, more justly famous work in the 1970s is established in his restless, energetic, resilient and often combative early career.

Nevertheless, it is rightly Altman’s films of the first half of the 1970s (up to and including *Nashville* in 1975) and 1990s and 2000s – his “return to form” and the “movies” with *The Player* in 1992 – that dominate the critical study of his work as well as his popular reputation. Although his quixotic career encompasses a myriad of approaches, genres and forms, it is still dominated by two particular types of structural, stylistic and narrative organization. The most famous of these is what I have termed elsewhere, “panoramic form,” an “ensemble” aesthetic that incorporates multiple interlacing plotlines, a mass of characters, an often digressive or episodic narrative, and a preoccupation with a particular industry, entertainment or social institution (see Danks 2000). This mosaic-like form often utilizes many of the key aesthetic and stylistic elements that define Altman’s work technically and even philosophically: a constantly shifting and reframing camera; the zoom lens; multitracked sound and overlapping dialogue; the use of multiple cameras; disruptive and deconstructive approaches to image and sound (see, for example, the substitution of the MGM lion’s roar with “I forgot the opening line” on the soundtrack of the opening credits of *Brewster McCloud*); expressive and sometimes deliberately murky and abstract deployment of color and light. Running alongside, and often crossing over with this particular form, is a revisionist approach to such classical Hollywood genres as the Western, the musical, the dance film, the detective film, the screwball comedy, the gangster film, the Hollywood-on-Hollywood film, etc. A number of the works in this mode tend to be more intimate in scale and focus on a smaller group of characters and their often shifting identities and subjectivities. Although some commentators have argued for the truly iconoclastic nature of these revisionist works – in terms of genre, character and audiovisual style – they actually represent a fascinating combination of critique, interrogation and questioning homage.

Altman’s Geographies

Altman’s cinema is also remarkable and important for its peculiar and idiosyncratic representation of space, place and time. A number of Altman’s films deal directly with US history and provide a pungent and often critical view of

American values, institutions and myths of origin and progress (and this is the focus of Helene Keyssar's [1991] seminal book on the director, *Robert Altman's America*). But although Altman's films can sometimes feel overly didactic in pursuit of the large symbol or emblematic event – say the clumsy staging and dialogue of much of the portentous last section of *Nashville*, the large-scale canvas and self-consciously restricted palette of *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, and pretty much all of the risible *Prêt-à-Porter* – they are more remarkable for their exploration of cinematic space and geographic place, as well as their often prismatic temporal structures. His films often create an extraordinarily expansive and potent sense of a particular place or environment that helps create an exceptionally democratized screen world that allows for significant audience interaction and on-set collaboration. Particularly memorable Altman environments include the soulful and wintry landscapes of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and *Quintet*, the spatialized geographies of *Nashville* and the modern Hollywood studio complex in *The Player*, the fluctuating pace and velocity of the upstairs–downstairs country mansion of *Gosford Park* and the streetscapes, cinemas and propulsive nightclubs of *Kansas City*. His films are also fascinating for the space and time they give to actors working out their performances and characters, and the physicality of the often striking and unconventional filmic personas they put on display. This is best demonstrated by the gangly Shelley Duvall in so many Altman films of the 1970s; Elliott Gould's mumbling, reactive Philip Marlowe in *The Long Goodbye*; Jennifer Jason Leigh's abrasive Blondie and Harry Belafonte's menacing, verbally agile Seldom Seen in *Kansas City*; and the full array of distinctive character actors, real-life personalities and long-term friends and associates that populate the director's work. This representation of place, time, space and character is often intimately linked to Altman's soundtracks, a truly sonic, prosaic and conversational domain that often revels in multiple points of interest and aural focus.

Throughout his career Altman has also tackled particular cultural industries (country and western music, Hollywood, radio, Kansas City jazz, the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago, *haute couture*), political institutions (the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, the fictional Replacement Party), social milieux (weddings, casinos, health conventions, gated enclaves), historical figures (Richard Nixon, Buffalo Bill, Vincent Van Gogh, Charlie Parker), generic formations (the Western, musical, thriller, detective and crime film, war movie) and geographic locations (Los Angeles, Nashville, Kansas City, Dallas, Paris, Houston, the Pacific Northwest), and it is the strength and clarity of observation and experiential detail of each that has determined the ultimate success of any specific film.

But Altman's films are still generally preoccupied with the “present moment” and contemporary America. Although Altman is rarely conventionally or straightforwardly “sympathetic” to his characters and situations, the greatness of films like *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, *Nashville* and *Gosford Park* lies in their ability to present both a sympathetically encompassing view and a blistering caricature

or parody of society's limitations (just think of the extraordinary range of types and qualities of musical performance in *Nashville*). Altman's truly great films, such as *The Long Goodbye* and *Thieves Like Us*, also rely upon providing a portrait of an environment or genre at a particularly pertinent moment, or from a distanced or detached but paradoxically involved point-of-view. For example, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* relies upon both an iconoclastic response to the Western and an insider's knowledge of the genre's deeper operations and motivations. It has also begun, with the passing of time and the deepening of its "atmospheric" rendering of the past, to look like an almost folk or classical work.

Many accounts of Altman's career have been preoccupied with his notoriously combative behavior, his hatred of producers, studio executives, and some writers, his willful abstraction of commercial forms, almost deconstructive approach to editing and story, and his infamous indulgence in a range of "extra-curricular" pursuits including gambling, womanizing, marijuana and alcohol (see McGilligan 1989). But although Altman's work betrays a dominant personality, a formidable work ethic and an extraordinary consistency of approach, it is also marked by a profound openness to collaboration, improvisation and interactivity in the spaces around its characters and narratives. As Altman himself has remarked:

According to me it's a collaborative art. I set a boundary line and framework, but I don't try to fill it all in. If I tried to put in the middle of it everything that was in my imagination, it would be simply that. It would be a very sterile work. So I try to fill it with things I've never seen before, things that come from other people. (Rosenbaum 1975, 92)

Altman's description of his filmmaking practice also clearly aligns his work with other art forms, such as music and painting. He has commonly claimed the affinity of his work with more abstract forms of art, seeing a freedom of expression, color, tone and shape as central to the ways in which he approaches image and sound as well as the narrative forms centered on story and characterization.

Like Jacques Tati, Altman's work incites the spectator to negotiate and navigate his or her own points of perceptual and intellectual focus or interest. This perceptual openness is encouraged by Altman's expressive and expansive use of the widescreen frame, experimentation with the cacophony of overlapping dialogue and multitracked sound, and interest in prismatic narrative structures (sometimes highly intricate and carefully composed) that de-emphasize or de-dramatize plot in favor of character, behavior and situation. Many of the greatest moments in Altman's cinema feature characters who are caught in the moment or whose actions are triggered by a shift of focus or perspective. For example, the extended opening "sequence" of *The Long Goodbye* alternates



Figure 1.2 Marlowe (Elliott Gould) fails to fool his cat in *The Long Goodbye* (1973) directed by Robert Altman, produced by Lion's Gate Films.

between the mumbling good-naturedness of Gould's Marlowe, the spaced-out reveries of his semi-naked neighbors, the breathtaking verticality of his apartment, the horizontality of Terry Lennox's speeding convertible, the endless variations on the title theme, and the unpredictable movements and finicky tastes of the detective's cat (Figure 1.2). The cat's performance is one of the great cameos in Altman's cinema and demonstrates the director's willingness to light on an unexpected element, figure or gesture as it flits through the frame.

This is also a key reason why Altman was often open to actors working on and developing their own dialogue or musical performances. Another brilliant demonstration of this restless curiosity is found in the "I'm Easy" sequence of *Nashville*. Although this scene does telescope into a kind of dialogue or conversation between Keith Carradine's Tom Frank and Lily Tomlin's Linnea Reese, it also uses the convention of the shot/reverse shot to complicate, confuse and delude the exchange of looks and desires caught up in the performance. Each of the singled-out female audience members at the club seems to believe that the song is being performed for *and* at them, but it is actually hard to read due to Altman's deliberate flaunting of the "rules" of continuity editing and the blankness and solipsism of Tom's solo acoustic performance. Also, although Tom may think that he is seducing Linnea through his deeply ambivalent and non-committal song, it is unclear who is truly manipulating who and benefiting from the exchange. All this is caught within the atmosphere of a bar scene that seems to blur the common distinction between documentary and fiction, authentic performance and self-conscious staging.

Altman's films and the individual frames within them truly encounter the notion of the canvas, and the opportunities that the breadth of such a canvas offers its audience for the activities of scanning and choosing. In this regard, his style can be considered as akin to a painting technique that leaves in

imperfections, flaunts its brushstrokes and provides a tapestry of observations rather than a balanced or obviously composed image (and this applies equally to the overall “form” of many of his films). Like in the films of Tati, such as *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (*Mr. Hulot’s Holiday*, 1953) or *Play Time* (1967), this choice of focus or emphasis, this relative democracy, is still deeply circumscribed by the stylistic choices the films make. But Altman’s films take an almost opposite tack to Tati’s, depending upon the “improvisation” of dialogue and performance, an intuitive response to place and situation, muddying and expanding the soundscape rather than separating out elements, and insisting on the varying planes and emphases of the pan and zoom rather than the locked-off shot and voluminous deep focus. Tati produces a sense of choice (and life) and liberated perception through the obvious mediation of everything that is seen and heard (including the meticulous construction of an “entire” city in *Play Time*), while Altman produces a similar effect by opening up the film to other voices, sounds, characters and narrative foci (while still constructing a town in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* or following the reckless narrative of the compulsive gamblers in *California Split*). In one of the best articles ever written on Altman, Jonathan Rosenbaum (1975) describes this process and how it embraces the spectator:

What might legitimately be regarded as a style whose accents and cadences – expressed through zooms, pans and qualities of light and focus, along with shifting stresses on the soundtrack – convey a dreamy vagueness, is equally a broad invitation to find one’s way in it, to merge with a narrative rather than simply be carried along by it. (93)

Altman’s cinema is truly an environment, geography or atmosphere to merge with rather than merely observe.

Altman and the Critics, or Canonizing Altman

As I have also argued above, and despite his ongoing reputation as one of the key American directors of the post-World War II era, Altman’s work has only ever intermittently met with commercial and sustained critical success. The overwhelming and surprising triumph of *MASH* in 1970 opened the door to numerous studios, producers and stars for the director, leading to a long string of films that largely failed to find much of a paying audience but which now significantly color and inform his subsequent reputation. Altman was able to keep afloat during this era due to his extraordinary productivity and the uncertainty and relative disarray of the industry itself. Altman’s “mainstream” career was maintained until the end of the 1970s, even despite a string of significant

financial and critical failures. After producing the second most commercially popular film of his career at the very start of the 1980s, *Popeye* (1980), Altman “retreated” to films of a more intimate or claustrophobic scale such as *Come Back to the 5 & Dime*, *Jimmy Dean*, *Jimmy Dean* and *Streamers*, adaptations of the work of significant writers such as Harold Pinter and Sam Shepard, a teaching post at the University of Michigan, and works for television ranging from an intense version of Herman Wouk’s *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial* to one of the key and most influential works of his entire career, *Tanner ’88* (1988).

Many of these works, such as *Secret Honor* (1984), occupy a single or a contained space and demonstrate a significant shift in Altman’s vision away from the broiling, expansive and socially ambitious extravaganzas of the 1970s. Though still restlessly cinematic, these smaller, more human works are even significantly reduced in scale when compared with the more intimate series of films Altman made in the 1960s and 1970s exploring the psychology and shifting and blurring identities of female subjectivity: *That Cold Day in the Park* (1969), *Images* and *3 Women* (1977). Although *Popeye* was a commercial success, it failed to reach the heights at the box office expected by its studios (Paramount Pictures and Walt Disney Productions), and the changing economic and aesthetic climate of Hollywood generally saw little advantage in continuing to work with such a challenging and willful director as Altman.

Altman’s place on the outer of mainstream filmmaking was reinforced by the melancholy fate of his own studio, Lion’s Gate Films, and the consciously charmless, almost pathological teen movie, *O. C. and Stiggs* – which sat on the shelf at MGM for almost four years – a bizarre, studio-financed adaptation of a generally witless series of sketches from *National Lampoon* featuring a pair of adolescent miscreants and made to cash-in on the then popular “animal comedies” (see Sanjek 1994, 40). Although this film, along with the shrill, relentlessly energetic and painfully unfunny *Beyond Therapy* (1987), marks something of a nadir in the director’s career, it, like virtually every other Altman work, has its defenders and features elements or moments that are intriguing, revealing or simply go recklessly beyond the pale. J. Hoberman, for instance, has argued that *O. C. and Stiggs* is “pure Altman – almost as if all his movies had been mashed together in a trash compactor” (quoted in Sanjek 1994, 44). The film is a tiresomely outrageous and outré comedy, and you do feel like you are in some kind of “trash compactor” while watching it, but it does feature some of the greatest musical performances in Altman’s work as a result of *O. C.*’s surprising and frankly incomprehensible adoration of the Nigerian-born musician, King Sunny Adé.

As various commentators have argued, Altman’s career is dotted with comebacks and subsequent failures. Although he worked consistently throughout the 1980s, and on a range of projects that often do share common thematic, stylistic and spatial characteristics and that repay much closer attention, it is only in the early 1990s that Altman once again became widely celebrated as an

innovative and interesting filmmaker working provocatively within and on the margins of Hollywood cinema. *The Player* is generally singled out as Altman's return to form, but this does a significant disservice to several of the more ambitious longer-form works he completed in the previous four years such as *Tanner '88* and *Vincent & Theo*, both of which explore key thematic preoccupations (party politics, the cultural industries, artistic expression) that have absorbed Altman across his career. Several of the more austere and contained theatrical adaptations, particularly *Secret Honor* and *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial*, also provide fascinating connections to the films of other periods and feature some of the best performances in all of Altman's work (such as that by Philip Baker Hall in the former). These works are equally provocative as the expression of middle age, and demonstrate Altman's capacity for stretching himself, exploring formal parameters and finding new avenues for artistic expression. Nevertheless, it is with the masterly but sometimes glib and always chilly *The Player* and *Short Cuts* that Altman returned to mainstream critical prominence.

Altman's career has also been intimately connected to and supported by the critical reception of his work more generally. From the early 1970s onwards his films have been routinely sold and analyzed as the work of a distinctive and iconoclastic auteur, a conceptualization that has had a profound impact on the work itself (even if a number of his films have been pilloried by many critics). Altman's most notorious critical *pas de deux* was with the massively influential critic for *The New Yorker*, Pauline Kael. Kael was even brought in to watch an early, longer cut of *Nashville* so that her subsequent rave review – pre-release – could be used as leverage with the studio executives. But Altman's film and television productions are notoriously quixotic and often restless, and virtually no two critics agree on the director's key works or the success and nature of his career's thematic, social and aesthetic insights and achievements. Even Kael became disenchanted by Altman's work, providing a chilly, almost personally slighted response to the film that followed *Nashville*, *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, and never again recovering quite the same degree of giddy passion for the director's work and vision (see Cook 1978, 6–9).

But I think it is actually impossible to be equanimous about the value and quality of the full range of Altman's packed, pugnacious and restlessly inquisitive career. As David Thomson (2002) once argued, "No one else alive is as capable of a dud, or a masterpiece" (14). Altman was seemingly more interested in the ongoing process and risk of creating work across a vast array of genres, places and conditions, than producing films of a consistent quality or easy accessibility (though many of his films repay multiple viewings). The failure of any specific film was soon forgotten in the heat of the next production or deal, a tough reality that became more frantic in the less receptive climate of post-1970s Hollywood. Altman himself often claimed that he liked almost all of his own films, and he emerges as a not particularly reliable guide

in terms of sifting through the canonical shape of his vast career (though Altman was often insightful and voluble about other elements of his work).

Nevertheless, it would be accurate to say that Altman's ongoing critical reputation rests upon the group of eight features he made between 1970 and 1975 – an absurdly productive and rich body of work – and several of the films he made after his comeback in the early 1990s: *The Player*, *Short Cuts*, *Gosford Park* and, at least for some, *A Prairie Home Companion*. But I actually think that Altman's legacy is larger and messier than this would suggest. His earlier exploits in industrial filmmaking and television do throw up a range of significant, unusual and expressive moments and works including a number of specific episodes of *Combat!* (which he produced, directed and sometimes wrote), his infamous contribution to *Bus Stop*, the fevered "A Lion Walks Among Us" (originally broadcast on December 3, 1961), the garish but soulful "Silent Thunder" (December 10, 1960) episode of *Bonanza*, and "Once Upon a Savage Night" (April 2, 1964), his prescient and noirishly bleak serial killer-themed contribution to the *Kraft Suspense Theatre*. Although I would certainly agree that the work made between 1970 and 1975 represents one of the great "silverstreaks" in American film history, and repays revisiting again and again, the Altman "canon" is significantly and rightly more inclusive and fragmented than such a holistic account would allow (if it exists at all). Aside from the earlier work, I would suggest an incorporative canon that ranged across *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, *The Long Goodbye*, *Thieves Like Us*, *California Split*, *Nashville*, *3 Women*, *Secret Honor*, *Tanner '88*, *Vincent & Theo*, *Kansas City*, *Gosford Park* and, sentimentally perhaps, *A Prairie Home Companion*. Such a list leaves out, necessarily, such significant though critically inflated Altman works as *MASH*, *The Player* and *Short Cuts*, but also a series of more piecemeal, site-specific and intermittently adventurous and appealing films that have attracted their own significant champions: *Brewster McCLOUD*, *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, *Popeye*, *Come Back to the 5 & Dime*, *Jimmy Dean*, *Jimmy Dean*, *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial*, and *Cookie's Fortune* (1999).

Altman's Legacy

Altman continues to exert a significant influence on contemporary cinema. Many films that utilize a multistrand or networked plot structure – such as *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999), and even the work of Taiwanese director Edward Yang and Australian filmmaker Ray Lawrence – betray the direct influence of Altman's cinema. Even contemporary forms of editing that rely upon non-linear principles and concepts have a fascinating symmetry with Altman's prismatic aesthetic. It is possible to see the direct influence of Altman on such revisionist television narratives as *Deadwood* (creator David Milch has

cited *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* as his core influence and point of reference), in much of the work of his protégé Alan Rudolph, all over such glossier Oscar winners as *Crash*, and most profoundly in the fascinatingly Altmanesque oeuvre of Paul Thomas Anderson (as well as several of his contemporaries such as Noah Baumbach). Anderson has often made direct reference to Altman's work, used actors associated with particular Altman films, lifted songs from his soundtracks, tinkered with variations on his multicharacter narratives, and acted as an "stand-by director" – actually required by the insurance company due to Altman's advanced age and heart transplant in the mid-1990s – for Altman's last work, *A Prairie Home Companion*. All of these examples, alongside the substantial previous critical work undertaken on the director, illustrate the ongoing significance of Altman as one of the key filmmakers of the post-World War II era.

Altman's life, career and work are vast in scale and implication; they "contain multitudes" as Walt Whitman philosophized in *Song of Myself*. *A Companion to Robert Altman* covers many of the key areas and films of Altman's career in close detail, presenting innovative, specific and expansive approaches to the director's work. Although no single book can address every detail and facet of Altman's massive career and body of work, this volume attempts to cover most corners of his television and film career and focuses attention upon both his most highly regarded and more obscure works. It also provides a multidisciplinary approach that allows critical discussion of the filmmaker's work in relation to such "rival" forms as painting, theatre, music and television, as well as the historical, industrial and metacritical contexts that illuminate his fascinating career.

This volume is particularly significant for the ways in which shifts focus to specific aspects of Altman's work that have perhaps been underexamined or theorized in previous book-length studies such as Patrick McGilligan's important biography, *Robert Altman: Jumping Off the Cliff*, Helene Keyssar's *Robert Altman's America*, Robert T. Self's seminal *Robert Altman's Subliminal Reality*, Rick Armstrong's smaller-scaled but impressive edited collection, *Robert Altman: Critical Essays*, and Gerard Plecki's *Robert Altman*. In particular, it attempts to explore, in some detail, Altman's early work in industrial filmmaking and television. Unlike many other accounts of this aspect of Altman's career, the chapters that deal with this material move beyond regarding this almost 20-year period as either of minor aesthetic or thematic interest or as merely an "apprenticeship" or prelude for the later, more important work in feature filmmaking. These chapters explore and elucidate the specific qualities and achievements of Altman's early work, what it says about broader patterns of television and industrial filmmaking in this era, and how it can be related to particular stylistic and thematic preoccupations in the director's later films. This volume takes a similar approach to other undervalued segments of Altman's career such as the often fascinating, consciously contained and piecemeal series of works he made in the 1980s and the varied group of

films he completed after the critical highpoint of *Short Cuts: Prêt-à-Porter*, *Kansas City*, *The Gingerbread Man* and *Dr T & the Women* (2000). The writers of all these chapters argue for a significant continuity of practice across all aspects of Altman's career.

Of course, any critical account of Altman's work has to take account of the legacy and importance of the films he made in the first half of the 1970s and their subsequent place within our understanding of what is now commonly called New Hollywood cinema. Several of the most influential accounts of this era, such as Peter Biskind's *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* and Ryan Gilbey's *It Don't Worry Me*, understandably and inevitably give pride of place to such legendary Altman works as *MASH*, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and *Nashville*. The chapters in this companion provide a more nuanced and varied approach to the films of this period – the weight of words alone would suggest *California Split* is actually the central Altman film of this period – and make significant connections to the varied work that appears before and after this extraordinary run of films including such misunderstood and generally unloved works as *Countdown*, *That Cold Day in the Park*, *Images*, *Buffalo Bill and Indians*, *A Perfect Couple* (1979) and *Quintet*. These chapters also focus upon the significant developments occurring in terms of Altman's approach to sound, image, acting, collaboration and location, and work to relocate these films in relation to a range of factors such as improvised group performance, music, female representation and queer cinema, genre, post-colonialism, place, developments in multi-tracked sound and shallow focus and widescreen cinematography.

The writers in this volume have also taken advantage of significant developments in film scholarship, film distribution and the archiving of Altman's career over the last 15 years. Altman was one of the most willing and thoughtful commentators on his own work. This is evidenced in such critical sources as Mitchell Zuckoff's *Robert Altman: An Oral Biography* and David Thompson's *Altman on Altman*, the range of interviews included in David Sterritt's *Robert Altman; Interviews*, the retrospective "making-of" documentaries included on many DVD releases, and the numerous directorial commentaries he recorded with various collaborators such as Elliott Gould, Joseph Walsh and George Segal (*California Split*), Kevin Kline (*A Prairie Home Companion*), producer David Foster (*McCabe & Mrs. Miller*), David Levy and Stephen Altman (*Gosford Park*), amongst many others, over the last decade or so of his life. Altman's work has also become much more widely available on properly apportioned DVDs that help register the audiovisual audacity of his greatest work (even if this is still seen to its best advantage on a big screen and on a 35mm celluloid print). The surface clutter and energetic "chaos" of many of Altman's films tend to obscure their often-careful construction as well as the meticulous detail of their production.

Several of the chapters included in this book have taken advantage of the extensive archive of Altman material now housed at the University of Michigan,

Ann Arbor. This archive contains a wealth of primary and secondary sources and has allowed for a more forensic and detailed portrait of the production conditions and decisions that helped create Altman's distinctive work in television and cinema. The foundation of this archive also led to an opening event in June 2013 that brought together many Altman collaborators and key scholars on his work, and incorporated the reading of unproduced scripts, an exhibition, and a variety of other activities. The UCLA Film and Television Archive also undertook a significant and extensive retrospective of Altman's work in 2014. This event reaffirmed the sustained interest in the director's career as well as allowing for a degree of reassessment of it. This season also included a preview screening of Ron Mann's feature-length documentary, simply titled *Altman* (2014).

This book would not have been possible without the support of my partner, Karli Lukas, and my daughter, Amelia Danks. I'd also like to thank the various editors at Wiley-Blackwell, my colleague Paul Ritchard and friend and fellow cinephile Sam Pupillo, who provided access to and copies of a number of difficult to find Altman works. This book wouldn't have got off the ground without the extraordinary commitment of its various contributors, many of whom are key figures in the field of "Altman studies" and enthusiastically supported the creation, curation and publication of this volume. This companion is dedicated to my parents, Valerie and David Danks and the late David Sanjek. Dave was one of the readers of the original proposal and had agreed to revisit his groundbreaking work on *O. C. and Stiggs* for this companion. This book, as well as the study of popular culture in general, is undoubtedly diminished by his absence, but I hope that the end result would have pleased him. Although neither of my parents are fans of Altman, despite having a soft spot for the Julian Fellowes-scripted *Gosford Park*, they are so important to me in terms of opening my eyes and ears to the cinema and taking me to see so many varied films as a child and teenager. They have also always supported me throughout my career as an academic and critic.

Finally, *A Companion to Robert Altman* is designed to be precisely what its title says it will be: a "companion." It needs to be read alongside the extremely fertile but unkempt career of its subject, as well as the significant body of critical work that has emerged over the last 40 years. This book is a conversation with rather than a definitive account of Altman's endlessly fascinating career. Companionship is also one of the defining features of Altman's work, from the stumbling romantic friendship between McCabe and Mrs. Miller and the shifting relationship that merges Millie and Pinkie in *3 Women* to the endless variations on the companionable couple in *California Split*, *Kansas City*, *MASH*, *O. C. and Stiggs*, and so many others. Altman's work has little to say about the dynamics of the biological family, or children, but it is almost overwhelmed by the teeming interactions and possibilities presented by the ensemble or the

group. Of course, Altman's final film contains the term "companion" in its title, an apt term to describe the camaraderie onscreen and on set during that last, gossamer-like film. But the best of Altman's films are also companions for one's journey through life; mercurial and rich tapestries that change color, shape, tone and value at each viewing. Altman's best work is not merely lively but life itself.

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