

Controlling the Situation



One can be grateful, for once, for the anomalies of British film distribution: that Robert Altman's two latest films (the long awaited *Thieves Like Us*, the more recent *California Split*) should be released almost simultaneously makes for illuminating juxtaposition, the more so in that the films are so different in tone. Though neither, at first viewing, seems to me quite as fine as *McCabe and Mrs Miller* or *The Long Goodbye* (*California Split* seeming, while splendidly inventive, curiously elusive, *Thieves Like Us* having the somewhat self-conscious air of artistically worked variations on a familiar theme), the dual premiere cannot but be an event: uneven as Altman's work has been, he has established himself as a director to whom one must attend.

Apart from their intrinsic quality (often very high indeed) Altman's films are interesting by virtue of their centrality to the development of the American cinema, their synthesis of contemporary tendencies. First, Altman is very conscious of his legacy; a number of his films are overtly retrospective, establishing their significance through their relation (half-homage, half-sardonic critique) to the Hollywood past. Without implying that Altman had specific forerunners in mind, one might profitably place *McCabe and Mrs Miller* beside Ford's *My Darling Clementine*, *The Long Goodbye* beside Hawk's *The Big Sleep*, *Thieves Like Us* beside Ray's *They Live By Night* (which was adapted from the same novel): the comparisons would illuminate not only the nature of the individual films but the changes in the Hollywood cinema and in American culture generally.

Second, that awareness of the European cinema that marks one of the decisive differences between the American cinema of today and the Hollywood of the studio/star/genre system - the increase in artistic consciousness or self-consciousness and the rise of the director as the *recognised* prime determinant of quality - is especially strong in Altman. One can recognise an Altman film as one can a Fellini or Antonioni - from its stylistic self-assertion.

Third, an equally conscious contemporaneity, a desire to capture impressionistically the mood of the age, dominates those films (*M.A.S.H.* and *California Split*) that one guesses Altman takes least seriously (though we need not necessarily follow suit). If several Altman films are critiques of past genres, *California Split* belongs very plainly to a currently fashionable one, the 'male duo' picture initiated by *Midnight Cowboy* and *Easy Rider* and represented more recently by *Scarecrow* and *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*: a phenomenon that has yet to be adequately explained, though it can doubtless be seen in part as a response to Women's Liberation and the threat posed to male supremacy, the implicit general thrust of the films being an assertion that women are not really indispensable (except as casually encountered sexual objects), and that life can find centres other than home-and-family. As in most Hollywood genres and cycles, the best films (*California Split* and Schatzberg's *Scarecrow*) tend to be those that most question and subvert the implicit ideological impulse.

Every new development in a collective art form produces its own general stylistic and formal procedures; the major artist is not so much the man who invents forms as the man who learns how to control them. Above all other contemporary American directors Altman has made artistic sense of the dominant technical devices of the modern cinema, the telephoto and zoom lenses - as the superb opening shot of *Thieves Like Us* alone suggests. Audiences accept these devices, presumably because of the conditioning effect of television; yet their tendency is strikingly to reverse the progress towards perfected photographic realism that was given such impetus by the development of deep focus by Welles, Wyler and Gregg Toland in the forties. Screen space today, instead of appearing stable and three-dimensional, is a matter of flattened or shifting perspectives as background and foreground move into and out of focus and distance is squeezed into flatness. Such technique lends itself to the expression of a sense of dream-like unreality; in Altman's films this is

intensified by his fascination (going right back to *That Cold Day in the Park*) with glass surfaces - characters seen in mirrors or through windows, with spatial relationships often confused or ambiguous.

Altman's movies reveal a very consistent recurrent pattern: the protagonist, confident of his ability to cope with what he undertakes, gradually discovers that his control is an illusion and that he has involved himself in a process of which his understanding is far from complete and which usually culminates in his own destruction. Brewster McCloud (in the film that bears his name), the boy convinced of his ability to fly, can stand as archetype of the Altman hero, but the pattern goes back at least to *That Cold Day in the Park*, where the woman (Sandy Dennis) who takes a boy (Michael Burns) who voluntarily submits to her whim both believe themselves to be controlling a situation that escalates into murder and insanity. More recently, McCabe (in *McCabe and Mrs Miller*), Marlowe (in *The Long Goodbye*) and Bowie (in *Thieves Like Us*) all constitute variations on this pattern. What is intermittently worrying about Altman is a tendency to look down on his characters. In fact, he is perhaps closer to them than he realises. For all the stylistic consciousness his films exhibit, he often seems only partially in control of the effects he creates - witness the use of 'Hurray for Hollywood' at the end of *The Long Goodbye*, the 'Romeo and Juliet' sequence of *Thieves Like Us*, and the whole of *M.A.S.H.* and *Images*, his worst two films which mark, interestingly, the polar extremes (popular and esoteric) of his work so far.

Even *California Split* (which I think may prove the more complex of the two new films as well as the more immediately pleasurable) diverges from this pattern only superficially. Here Bill (George Segal) 'knows' he is on a winning streak and ends up with a fortune; yet his triumph exists only within an absurd world and his progressive involvement in gambling is accompanied by a progressive loss of identity and sense of meaning. His sudden, sobered reaction to winning, the decision to 'go home', derives its poignance from the fact that he no longer has a home to go to. Like his predecessors in Altman's films, he is in a world in which all certitudes have ceased to exist.

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Times Educational Supplement, 28 February, 1975.

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[Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism](#), 4, 2013.