

We continue the initiative begun in *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism 2* by offering a further selection from the articles that Robin Wood contributed to *The Times Educational Supplement*. We are grateful to Richard Lippe and the *TES* for encouraging us to restore this important work to circulation. For this issue we have gathered together three articles on films by Robert Altman and two on Kenji Mizoguchi movies.



The films of Robert Altman are curious, uneven, occasionally remarkable hybrids: the work of an American director who would like to be 'European': would like, that is, to be an Antonioni or a Fellini expressing himself not through the elaborated conventions of the Hollywood cinema, but directly, through personal style and an idiosyncratic choice of material. This has led him, at times, to intractably off-beat subject-matter (*Brewster McCloud* and *Images*) and a resulting pretentiousness. At the same time, he is clearly also preoccupied with America, and with being American. He wants to express his sense of superiority to the commercial Hollywood cinema, so he goes away and makes *Images*, a defiantly anti-commercial attempt at illusion-and-reality profundity that succeeds merely in being trendy. Yet he also loves the traditional American cinema more than he wants us to believe, and in his best work acknowledges his heritage tenderly and nostalgically, if perhaps unwittingly.

He describes *The Long Goodbye* as a 'satire' - it is not entirely clear on what: on Philip Marlowe, on Raymond Chandler, on 'private eye' thrillers, on Hollywood itself. One suspects that he might similarly regard *McCabe and Mrs Miller* as a 'satire' on westerns. But 'never trust the artist - trust the tale': neither film is primarily satirical in effect, and the relationship of each to its genre is more complex and more constructive than Altman's remarks suggest. All great artists working within genres (and the term should be understood loosely enough to include Haydn and Mozart as well as Ford and Hawks) have proceeded by subtly cheating or exceeding the expectations arising from the familiarity of genre conventions, and hence creating new expectations, so that the conventions are never stable but are in a continuous process of transformation. Altman's treatment of genre is not fundamentally different; the transformations are somewhat more abrupt and extreme, but then he is looking at genre retrospectively, from a

period in which, deprived of the studio-and-star system that supported it, it has declined.

It seems to me quite unhelpful to call *McCabe and Mrs Miller* an anti-western: it is simply one of the finest westerns of recent years, its surface cynicism (in relation to Fordian myth) quite undermined by a tenderness for primitive American civilisation (expressed in the loving accumulation of evocative detail) no less moving than Ford's. If *McCabe* and *The Long Goodbye* are easily Altman's best films to date (incomparably richer than the pseudo-profound *M.A.S.H.*) this is precisely because of the sustenance they draw from the genres they appear to undermine.

Altman's Marlowe is - both in his characterisation and in his relation to his environment - strikingly like McCabe: boyish, superficially assured, inwardly vulnerable, essentially innocent. The film, too, has its predecessor's beauty, and its tone of pervasive melancholy, from which its equally pervasive comedy is never free. Altman's stylistic insistence on glass surfaces - characters seen through or reflected in windows - combines with the widespread use of the telephoto lens, with its tendency to flatten perspectives, to create a world of brittle and deceptive appearances through which Marlowe fumbles his way. The film's central strategy is to distance Marlowe from us as Chandler, imprisoned in the convention of first person narrative, never did. Those maddeningly slick wisecracks that Chandler offers us straight, Altman beautifully 'places': no one laughs at them, including the audience, and they emerge as quite ineffectual, more pathetic than funny, the attempts of an arrested adolescent to insulate himself from the disturbing instabilities of a world he cannot cope with.

Impotence is the central characteristic of Altman's Marlowe (in the literal as well as the metaphorical sense - where other men have girls, Marlowe has a cat). He sits helplessly by while a gangster, merely to demonstrate

what he might do to people he dislikes, smashes in with a coke bottle the face of the girl he claims to love. Marlowe is always too late. In the film's most haunting sequence he and Eileen Wade (Nina van Pallandt) talk by a window through which we can see, in distant long-shot, her husband, whom Marlowe was originally called in to find and save, walking out into the ocean; without a cut, but with a gradual adjustment of focus, the telephoto zoom transfers our attention from the foreground dialogue to the lonely man whose despair Marlowe earlier brushed aside and later tries glibly to rationalise. At the end, Marlowe finds a spurious potency in shooting the friend he has foolishly trusted, then skips away down the road (passing the troubled woman whose chance of happiness he has just destroyed) in boyish movements that at once express his sense of release and tell us he has learnt nothing.

The particular hybrid quality of *The Long Goodbye* can be suggested by saying that, while firmly rooted in its genre, the films it most evokes are Antonioni's. Like Giuliana in *Red Desert*, Marlowe is an anachronism who can't adapt to his world; like Thomas in *Blow Up*, he moves through situations and encounters calculated to test and undermine his sense of the identity of things. Unlike Thomas, he is protected by his moral code - a sort of artificial skin that prevents him from feeling the complexities of people's needs.

Yet, for all his failures, Marlowe (in the most likeable and unmannered performance Elliot Gould has given) retains our sympathy without becoming, like Antonioni's protagonists, the exclusive positive centre of the film. The difference lies in Altman's much more successful placing and distancing of his leading character: we are never imprisoned in Marlowe's view of things, and can judge him as decent but perennially misguided. Altman, unlike Antonioni, allows us an understanding beyond his protagonist's. The overall effect is resilient: the distancing spares us the trapped and defeated feeling of *Blow Up*. Where Antonioni is thrown back exclusively on his own sensibility, Altman's is subjected to the discipline of the genre conventions on which *The Long Goodbye* is a tender-ironic meditation. The result seems to me easily the best film ever made from a Chandler novel.

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