Document Citation

Title	**Movies : A formal affair**
Author(s)	Stuart Byron
Source	*Harper's*
Date	1978 Oct
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	104-106
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	
Film Subjects	A wedding, Altman, Robert, 1978

A FORMAL AFFAIR

Robert Altman's *Wedding*

by Stuart Byron

AUDEN SAID SOMEWHERE that while most kinds of writers like to use words to say something, the mark of the potential poet is that he likes to hang around words to see what they say. By that definition, there is no more "poetic" talent working today in the American commercial cinema than Robert Altman. The subject of most of his films is the cinema itself, its conventions and possibilities; through the films he tinkers joyfully with cinematic expectations.

For example, when private detective Elliott Gould cold-bloodedly murdered client Jim Bouton at the end of *The Long Goodbye*, the motive was as much artistic as it was anything else. In the great tradition of detective-story beginnings, Bouton had come to Gould claiming to be a man wrongly accused of murder, and Gould, again traditionally, had spent the entire movie searching for the real murderer. But it turned out that Bouton had been rightfully accused, and that by fooling Gould he was breaking faith with the conventions of an entire literature. As for last year's *3 Women*, I sometimes feel that the director's main reason for making it was to execute an abrupt switch from social comedy to Jungian fantasy three-quarters of the way through—perhaps the most outrageous change of tone in Hollywood history.

If *A Wedding*, Altman's new film, is a giant step forward for the director, it is because Altman does not limit his experimentalism to broad generic strokes; this film is constantly breaking the rules in small as well as big ways. And yet, if people are predicting that *A Wedding* is his best shot at a mass popular success since *M*A*S*H* (1970), it is because Altman has confined that experimentalism to his way of telling his story. As long as it can be figured out, the story itself—unlike that of *The Long Goodbye* or *3 Women*—should be familiar enough to the average viewer. I understand (though I don't agree with) the complaint of a friend of mine that when all is considered in comprehensible form, *A Wedding* is nothing more than a hipper, more sophisticated version of *Lovers and Other Strangers*. Its selection as the opening night film at this year's New York Film Festival ("entertainment values" are supposed to predominate on opening night) is testament enough to its potential popularity.

The movie chronicles the events that occur during a wedding ceremony and reception in a fashionable Chicago suburb. The groom is the product of a mother whose old-line family was ostracized by the rest of high society when she married her mysterious Italian husband. The bride is the youngest daughter of a nouveau-riche trucking family from Louisville.

That is the basic narrative situation, and one way of talking about the ways in which Altman challenges linear traditions is to report that this information is only half-revealed at the beginning of the movie. Half. The strange, convoluted history of the groom's family is hardly hurled at us in one piece, and there are times when we're meant to be briefly misled—for example, for a short while we think the groom's father has Mafia connections—but that history does become clear to us early enough on. At the very least, there comes a point when, as in most dramatic structures, we can stop figuring out who people are and start concentrating on what they do and how they act.

Not so with the bride's family. Until the sudden revelation that they are millionaire truckers is thrown at us fifteen minutes before the movie's end, we have been forced to wonder just who they are. And we have probably come to all the wrong conclusions. The Brenners—the bride's family—have a mildly hillbilly manner and dress in a decidedly homey manner. They must be poor, we think, else why is the reception taking place at the groom's home? When it turns out that the Brenners were the ones who paid for the wedding, when we learn that they have an income of $5 million a year, we are forced to reconsider everything that has already happened in the movie. We are forced, perhaps, to come to terms with our own class assumptions in what is still, apparently, a financially mobile America.

A FILM IN THE Brueghelesque tradition of *Grand Hotel* and Truffaut's *Day for Night*—not to mention Altman's own *Nashville*—*A Wedding* does not really have one "story." It's best described as a series of episodes, revelations, and stories centering on a unifying situation, in this case a wedding reception. Forty-eight characters, twice the number in *Nashville*, have been created by Altman, in collaboration with screenwriters John Considine, Patricia Resnick, and Allan Nicholls, though the two-hour running time requires that some characters are more equal than others. A formidable cast of knowns and unknowns mills about the groom's huge family mansion all afternoon playing these characters. Mother of the groom Nina Van Pallandt turns out to be a heroin addict. Father of the groom Vittorio Gassman is not a mafioso after all but a former Roman busboy whose secretive air is designed to hide his lower-class past. Mother of the bride Carol Burnett has a wild, two-hour near-affair with uncle of the groom Pat McCormick. Uncle of the bride

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Gerald Busby, a minister, reveals a sordid past. Caterer Viveca Lindfors, felled by fever, is given amphetamines by an unethical doctor and sails through the reception on wings of verbal inanity. And so on.

One feels that what interests Altman in all this is not so much what is presented, but how. It is not only that we know the bride's family "as people" before learning the basic socioeconomic fact that they are millionaire truckers. It is that we are consistently exposed to character and personality without having the slightest idea of who a person is or why he or she is at the wedding. Very early on, for example, a security guard prevents a protesting Nina Van Pallandt from entering the reception. This would be funny if we knew at the time that Van Pallandt is the mother of the groom, and, thus, mistress of the very house she is being prevented from entering. But we don't: What interests Altman is the raw behavior of the character, irrespective of context. It's almost as if we, the audience, were strangers at this wedding and had to figure out who everybody was. By the end, we haven't quite done so; as at a real wedding, we leave muttering, "Who was *he?* Was he related to the bride?" This way of constructing a film thus breaks all the rules of the "well-made play." Behavior is what interests Altman first, and what he shows us first. Behavior then leads to character, and only at the end do we reach "story" or "plot."

But even as he shows us behavior, Altman often wants us to misinterpret it. That the Brenners are far wealthier than they appear to be is but one of the many deceptions that the wily director perpetrates. A thief stealing the presents turns out to be the groom's uncle—examining the presents. A teenager who seems to be using epilepsy as an excuse to pop pills turns out really to have epilepsy. A homosexual seduction in a shower is really, when we look closely, nothing more than an attempt to sober someone up. A nurse who appears to be a shirker emerges as quite serious about her job. Lillian Gish, as the matriarch of the old-line Chicago family, plays the same sweet, benign old lady that has become her latter-day specialty—but it turns out that she's a stern, inhumane family leader whose uncompromising demands have driven her daughter to drugs.

There's one final, spectacular deception that it would be unfair for a reviewer to reveal. But so dramatic is this episode, so startling in its spectacle, that it forces us into considerations of the nature of art itself, of the differences between art and life. An incident that, in real life, would be a shattering event turns out, when its true nature is revealed, to be irrelevant to the concerns of the people in *A Wedding*. Every work of narrative art, Altman seems to be saying, sets up its own areas of feeling, sympathy, and concern—and what would in life be a complete catastrophe is little more than a shaggy dog story when placed in the context of a particular work of art. In any event, the main subject of the film is revealed to be film—i.e., art—itself. The question is: Is this enough?

JONATHAN ROSENBAUM, who is one of the director's most sympathetic and perceptive critics, complains in the current (September-October) issue of *Film Comment* that Altman is too readily considered a "modernist." Rosenbaum thinks that this term should be reserved for such undiluted experimenters as Jean-Marie Straub and Jacques Rivette. Yet it seems to me that despite its trappings of entertainment, *A Wedding* is so interested in formal issues and so devoid of paraphrasable content that only the modernist term will suffice to justify it. After three viewings, it is almost impossible for me to discover anything that the film has to say morally, sociologically, or metaphysically. Only as a formal experiment, a daring attempt to make us realize how we "read" works of narrative art, does the film succeed—and succeed magnificently—in being an imaginative filmgoing experience.

Such formal pleasures are more than enough for me, but those who look for kernels of meaning from movies are not going to be satisfied. Auden himself might not approve; after all, a fascination with words or forms was the sign of the *potential* poet. The mature one has, as English teachers put it, "something to say." And if there is a general argument against Altman, it is that too often his films are indifferent to content. Even when they contrive to say something, the argument goes, they say two contradictory things. Reviewing *Thieves Like Us* in *Time*, Jay Cocks argued that the problem with the typical Altman movie is that it is very carefully constructed to be open to any interpretation. No better example of this thesis can be found than the ending of *Nashville*, the director's last big conversation piece. I happen to think that in that particular film Altman had a lot to say, but there's no doubt that it lends itself to both optimistic and pessimistic interpretations. Some argued that the crowd of country-music fans singing "It Don't Worry Me" following the assassination of a singer showed the indomitability of the human spirit. Others claimed as forcefully that it was meant to demonstrate the crassness of the American soul. But what seems most likely is that the filmmaker wanted us to be able to draw both conclusions.

If I were forced to extrapolate a meaning from *A Wedding*, I would say that it probably emanates from an event that occurs early in the movie, when the family matriarch played by Lillian Gish dies; such is the momentum generated by the wedding schedule that the celebration proceeds as originally planned. This may well be the message that Altman wishes to impart: People survive. They go on. For most of us, life has its own mindless momentum. Life is not a movie; that is, tumultuous events ("drama") do not really affect us. Asked about the lonely figure of Shelley Duvall at the end of *Thieves Like Us*, Altman replied, "She's a survivor." So maybe all of his protagonists, at the end of all his movies, are simply survivors.

For me, an Altman movie passes from success into greatness when I can say of it that its characters not only survive but, like Faulkner's Mankind, endure. For this to happen, the human sympathy and complexity realized throughout the movie must be very strong. It's happened twice—with *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Nashville*. Two masterpieces during the Seventies are one more than any other American director has provided us, and, if *A Wedding* doesn't make for three, it still says something about Robert Altman that he is a director from whom we expect masterpieces, and that we are disappointed when he doesn't quite make it. □