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While most commercial American streamliners turn all members of an audience into second-class passengers following the same route from an identical vantage point, Robert Altman's multilinear adventures oblige us to take some initiative in charting out the trip – supplying one's own connections, and pursuing one's own threads and interpretations in order to participate in a game where everyone, on-screen and off, is entitled to a different piece of the action.

Admittedly, this is a somewhat idealised description of an approach that is still in a state of development, and not every Altman film conforms precisely to this model. From *Countdown to Nashville* – and quite apart from his varied earlier work in TV and elsewhere, which this season omits – he has followed a jagged path of trial and error. But over the six years traversed in this retrospective, he has gradually been evolving a set of methods that continue to grow in overall range and confidence.

Altman creates the space for our participation in a number of ways: Through a use of overlapping verbiage, which makes each spectator into a selective eavesdropper. Through the unpredictable interplay brought about by the intervention of an independent 'text' – from the p.a. announcements in *M*A*S*H* to the children's book excerpts in *Images*, from the radio shows in *Thieves Like Us* to the political campaign speeches in *Nashville* – which requires the activity of a personal synthesis. Through the off-centre

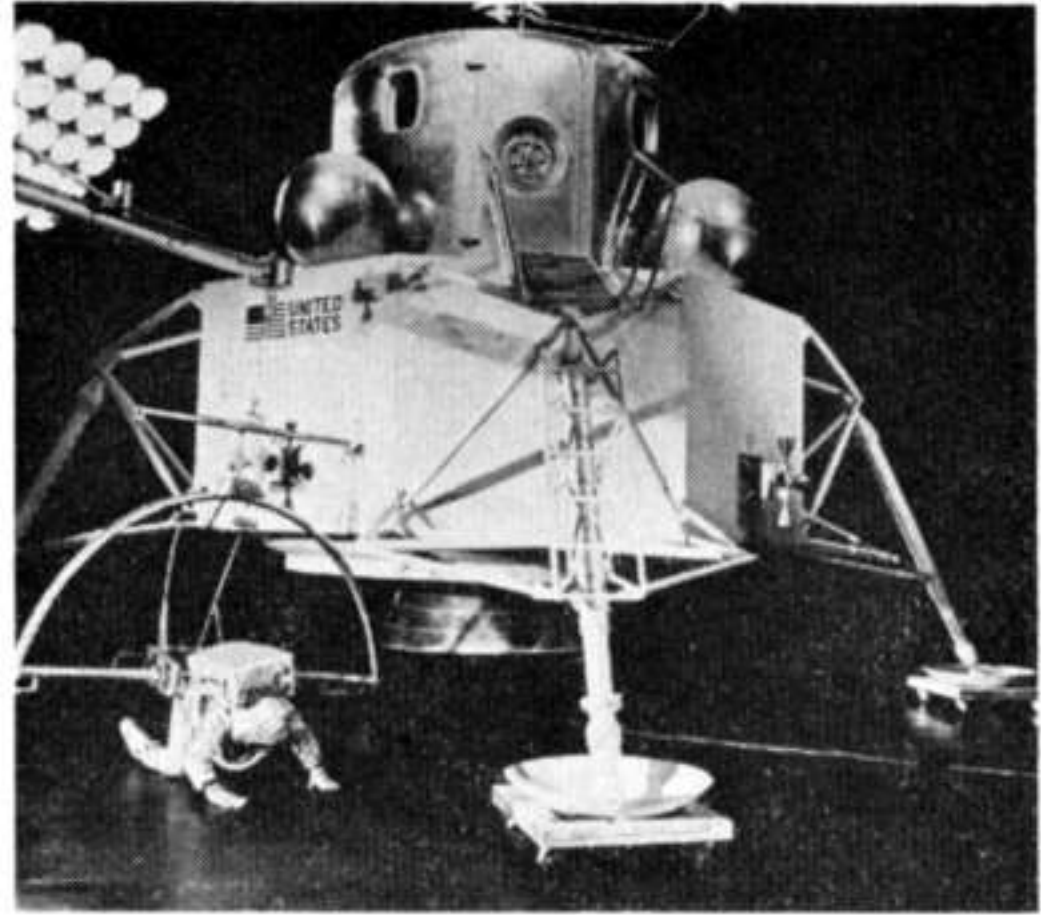
timing, spacing and framing of scenes which require one to pick and choose one's own stresses and points of entry, treating the entire screen as a *surface to scan* rather than as a predetermined set of fixed hierarchical values to follow. More specifically, through a use of the zoom lens as functional and justifiable as that of any narrative director since Rossellini, whereby the camera by becoming a creative witness, encourages the viewer to make independent choices of attention in concert with or in opposition to this active guide. And through an increasing use of actors as free and autonomous agents, individually and collectively generating their own meanings and interest beyond the dictates of a script or thesis, coupled with a use of improvisation that inspires an accompanying spontaneity of response.

All these procedures potentially place film-makers and viewers alike in a perpetual state of becoming, where form functions as a verb instead of a noun, a kind of work-in-progress that registers as a spirited form of *play* – until (or unless) messages originating outside this process intervene to cut the creative participation short, as in the last scenes of *The Long Goodbye* and *Nashville*. These two movies, along with *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *California Split*, comprise Altman's broadest steps to date towards an audience's freedom; the others sustain interest as relevant forays along the way. Obviously, it is a freedom that can only grow in proportion to the capacities of audiences and film-makers to recognise that it exists. – Jonathan Rosenbaum.

Tue 13 Jan 6.30

Countdown

"Jesus Christ!" the Warner Brothers producer reportedly exclaimed after seeing the rushes. "You've got all the actors talking at once! Who's going to understand it?" The studio promptly took over the editing and shot extra scenes. "In theory, the film was about a moon shot," Altman has said, "but what interested me was the human situation behind such endeavours: the petty politics, the bitchiness of the wives, that sort of thing." Attractive Panavision images and a curious James Caan performance offer some clues to what might have been. *U.S.A. 1968/With Robert Duvall.*



Wed 14 Jan 6.30

That Cold Day in the Park

Despite its *Grand Guignol* climax, a cool little melodrama that treats the characters' problems as an environmental malaise, and so is oddly characteristic of post-*M*A*S*H* Altman. A lonely spinster (Sandy Dennis) comes upon a shivering hippy (Michael Burns) in a Vancouver Park; she plays ministering angel, he a mute and innocent foundling. The tricks and confusions of identity result in chaos, and the breakdown in communication is signalled with a precise visual metaphor in which the glacial objects and fragile surfaces of this world are forever sliding queasily out of focus. (R.C.) *U.S.A. 1969/With Luana Anders, Michael Murphy.*

Mon 12 Jan 6.30. 8.45/Thu 15 Jan 6.30

M*A*S*H

Altman was either the 14th, 17th or 18th director to be shown Ring Lardner Jr.'s script for this Korean War comedy, and the enormous box-office success of the movie contrived to put his name – and some of the rudiments of his quirky methods – on the map. Militating for the heady consensus of a mob's euphoria over inflexible regulations and decorum in an army medical unit, this energetic, efficient and rather demagogic farce leaves little to the imagination, but moves with a rapidity designed to dispel all objections. *U.S.A. 1969/With Elliott Gould, Donald Sutherland.*





Fri 16 Jan 6.30. 8.45

Brewster McCloud

Altman's first flight of relative freedom takes the form of zany fantasy: a young Icarus (Bud Cort) nurtures dreams of escape in the bowels of the Houston Astrodome, defeating a parodic string of all-American pea-brains (Stacy Keach, Bert Remsen, Michael Murphy) who cramp his style. Wildly overlapping bird lore, social protest, allegory and assorted Altman extras, this nonconformist *jeu d'esprit* after the conformist antics of *M*A*S*H* aims at everything and sometimes scores. Watch for John Schuck's hilarious cop and Shelley Duvall's debut as a deadly Texas tease. *U.S.A. 1970/With Sally Kellerman, René Auberjonois.*

Sun 18 Jan 4.15. 6.30. 8.45

McCabe and Mrs. Miller

The first Altman masterpiece, in which all his free-form methods assuredly take hold. With Leonard Cohen songs alternately matching or colliding with haunting period images and a superb use of impressionistic overlapping dialogue, Warren Beatty and Julie Christie in their best performances explode and resurrect the myth of the Western, and explore the politics of 'money and pain' in the Northwest settlement of First Presbyterian Church. Tender, tough and unforgettable. *U.S.A. 1971/With Keith Carradine, Hugh Millais.*



Mon 19 Jan 6.30. 8.45

Images

Reportedly one of Altman's own favourites, and the only one of his features since *The Delinquents* (1955) scripted by himself, this is an old project which came out of the drawer after the success of *M*A*S*H*. More European in influence than his other movies, this introspective 'chamber work' about a schizophrenic woman features some lovely camerawork by Vilmos Zsigmond and a truth-or-illusion plot echoing some of the more familiar elements in *Repulsion* and *Persona*. *Eire 1972/With Susannah York, René Auberjonois.*



Wed 21 Jan 6.30. 8.45/Fri 23 Jan 6.30. 8.45

The Long Goodbye

Although this updating of Chandler angered many purists, its daring formal departures (unorthodox and virtually continuous camera movements, ingenious permutations and fragmentations of the title tune) and hallucinatory performances (Mark Rydell, Sterling Hayden, Henry Gibson) make this Altman's most remarkable achievement to date. It is also the definitive L.A. movie, reproducing the experience of that city structurally in its nightmarish labyrinth of dislocations and broken encounters. *U.S.A. 1973/With Elliott Gould, Nina van Pallandt.*



Cancelled: Not available for season

Thieves Like Us

With the help of Joan Tewkesbury (who also scripted *Nashville*). Altman proves that he can spin a conventional narrative as well as anybody in this remake of *They Live By Night*, adapted from Edward Anderson's novel, about Depression bank robbers in search of domesticity. More direct in its compassion than Altman's other works, and beautifully rendered by regulars Keith Carradine, Shelley Duvall, John Schuck and Bert Remsen. *U.S.A. 1973/With Louise Fletcher, Ann Latham.*

Sat 24 Jan 4.15. 6.30. 8.45

California Split

Further developing his overlapping chatter and chance encounters, Altman brings to this dizzy gambling spree a livelier sense of spontaneity than ever before. What emerges is gestural cinema, in which dialogue serves more as an indication of behaviour than as a set of thematic signals. One is asked to improvise along with the film-makers in an intuitive terrain, where 'background' and 'foreground' elements jostle for attention while up front, George Segal's inner-fire is set off by the cascading cadenzas of Elliott Gould. *U.S.A. 1974/With Gwen Welles, Ann Prentiss.*

