

Document Citation

Title	On film : Just plain populist folks
Author(s)	Joy Gould Boyum
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Nashville, Altman, Robert, 1975

Just Plain Populist Folks

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

If Hollywood is movies, if New York is Wall Street and Indianapolis is its speedway, Nashville is country music. A small city, population about 175,000, it is second only to New York as a recording center, producing rock and gospel music but above all, that kind of down-home sound which in the last decade or so has carried its banjos, fiddles, steel guitars, and feathery drums beyond their regional boundaries into the mainstream of American pop. Nashville calls itself, in fact, Music City, U.S.A.

And filmmaker Robert Altman has taken it at its word. In his astonishing

On Film "Nashville"

film, "Nashville," it is its recording studios, its performers, its pop concerts that define the city for us and which, at the same time, allow Nashville in turn to define America. "You want to connect into what's happening these days," Bob Dylan is said to have remarked some years ago, "you turn on the radio." Every Friday and Saturday night, Nashville broadcasts its famous radio program, The Grand Ole Opry, filling the airways with country and western's sentimental and simplistic lyrics celebrating home, family, God and country.

Setting this pop music to populist politics, Altman not only persuades us that it is in this Nashville sound we will find America but also allows us to see politics as the ultimate pop experience. And setting both music and politics to his own distinctive filmmaking style Altman also creates what is both his most serious film and a comic portrait of America at its bicentennial.

Reminiscent in its structure of literary works whose intention has been to give us a picture of a city—James Joyce's "Ulysses," Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway"—"Nashville" has little plot to speak of and divides its interest among many characters. Like these novels, too, its source of unity is space and time as, over a five-day period it interweaves the lives of 24 characters. One of the film's marvels is the way in which it manages to make each member of its huge cast, even the most peripheral of them—Jeff Goldblum's man on a tricycle who wanders through the film performing magic tricks; Barbara Harris' would-be country star; Shelley Duvall's wildly costumed groupie; Keenan Wynn's kindly and gentle old man—distinct and memorable and meaningful to the whole. Remarkable, too, is the way the film intercuts so smoothly, through Altman's seemingly casual yet controlled manner, all these characters' lives, as their individual paths cross at an airport, in a hospital, in a massive traffic jam and finally at a climactic political rally whose preparation forms "Nashville's" chief action.

A native son, Hal Phillip Walker, is running for United States President—his party is the Replacement Party, his slogan "New roots for the nation"—and Triplette, a superbly smooth young political worker in Michael Murphy's performance, has come to Nashville to organize local talent for a rally in Walker's behalf, tempting singers largely by the fact that the event will be televised nationally. Walker, significantly, never appears on screen; but throughout the film, his campaign truck is seen winding its way through Nashville (much as in "Ulysses" the vice-regal cavalcade makes its way through Dublin or as in "Mrs. Dalloway," the airplane sky-

writes its way over London), passing en route all of the film's major and minor characters.

But Hal Phillip Walker's campaign truck not only serves as the film's central unifying device; it also articulates the film's major themes. "All of us are equally involved with politics whether we know it or not, like it or not" are among the first words we hear from the truck's speaker as well as from the film itself, following the witty title sequence which simulates those late night TV ads for The Greatest Hits of the '60s. Yet, of course, the ever present truck is itself a commercial, announcing each time it appears another item in the populist dream it is selling: "Battle vast oil companies; tax church-owned property and multimillion dollar incomes." In other words, bring to heel the wealthy and powerful. "And I'll do it for you," Walker's voice keeps telling us, "because unlike the mighty rich and just like you, I know what it's like to struggle and be poor."

But the dream is actually, the film suggests, to join the mighty rich—that is, to make it to stardom. For while the candidate tells the people he is just like them, the people idolize him not simply for that but even more for having made it, and so for symbolizing their own possibilities. And this relationship between the "candidate" and his constituency is reflected by the film in that between the country singers and their fans.

Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson), the middle-aged, pint-sized superstar who struts through the movie in a white, embroidered cowboy suit, keeps assuring his fans, who love him for it, that he is just plain folks—a pious, patriotic, hardworking, devoted family man whose wife may be conspicuously absent from his public appearances, but who always manages to bring along his baby-faced, Harvard graduate son—and sings songs which make the point.

Talking with Triplette, Haven, like all the music stars, insists he doesn't want to get involved in politics. But Haven, who is finally tempted to join the rally when told that Hal Phillip Walker thinks he would make a great governor, is already involved in politics. He is already a leader of his people, a man whose platform, like Walker's, appeals to the emotions of the common folk. Yet, though clearly a demagogue of sorts, Haven is also a man who in all likelihood is totally sincere in his commitments. At the rally, Haven is injured and while Walker's shiny limousine retreats, Haven shows where his heart is, staying on with the near panicked crowd to settle their nerves and bolster their spirits.

The treatment of Haven is, of course, a clue to the complexity of Altman's film, which throughout won't allow us facile judgments—and often by including these judgments in the film itself, placing them in the mouths of its flawed and dishonest characters. Geraldine Chaplin's Opal, a BBC journalist in Nashville to do a documentary, expresses all the standard criticisms concerning Southern prejudice, American wastefulness and violence. But Opal is the film's most comic creation; a pretentious, silly, and deeply prejudiced woman. Still, her views are no more easy to put down than Haven's unsuspected heroism is to cheer. His first song has been a celebration of America's bicentennial, "We must be doing something right to last 200 years," while the last song, the one with which the crowd is rallied in crisis, is "It don't worry me." Is it, then, in this lyric that we find the "something right" we've been doing? Is it the ability to avert our eyes and just go on pretending nothing happened that is, in Altman's view, the ironic key to America's survival?