

“TAKE HER CLOTHES OFF AND BRING HER TO ME!”:
EXAMINING THE DIALOGIC CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN
IN ROBERT ALTMAN’S FILMS

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DEDICATION

For my daughters, Christianne and Natalie

Build your castles in the air, and then put foundations under them.

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I would like to express deep and sincere gratitude to my advisor and director Dr. Lou Thompson for her support and encouragement throughout my academic journey, which began so many years ago. I am especially grateful for her thoughtful insight and tireless dedication to my research and writing about films, most especially her guidance with this project on the women in Robert Altman's films. I would have never completed this project without her unwavering commitment to my research and writing.

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Finally, there are two additional professors I would like to thank for their contributions to my research, writing, and academic growth. The first is Dr. Russel Greer, who introduced me to Mikhail Bakhtin and his theories about language and discourse and helped me discover the value of those theories for the study of rhetorical artifacts. The second is Dr. Hugh Burns, with whom I first studied in the 1990s as an undergraduate. Dr. Burns also taught the first class I took in graduate school, research, and bibliography methods, in the summer of 2003, and it was in that first graduate course that Dr. Burns gave me the most valuable advice I have ever received about writing. I had been researching women pirates in the Caribbean during the eighteenth century, and my

research was so successful that I had become overwhelmed with the amount of material I had discovered. Not knowing what to write or even where to begin, I asked Dr. Burns for advice. I will never forget his response, which was succinct, simple, and *very* practical: “Just write sentences.” And it is that advice from Dr. Burns that I followed when I would begin to feel overwhelmed with the scope of this project. I just wrote sentences; and, eventually, I had a complete manuscript.

ABSTRACT

CHARLENE SMITH GREEN

“TAKE HER CLOTHES OFF AND BRING HER TO ME!.”

EXAMINING THE DIALOGIC CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN

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DECEMBER 2017

This research examines the women characters in Robert Altman’s feature films from 1967 through 2006. Considered one of the most influential American filmmakers of the late twentieth century, Altman’s career spans six decades and comprises thirty-six feature films. Critical scholarship about Altman’s films has generally focused on genre convention and corruptions; his use of large, ensemble casts and intertwining stories; his use of overlapping dialogue and multi-layered soundtracks; and, his recreation of a distinctly *Altmanesque* American cultural landscape.

While some criticism has been devoted to the study of a few major female characters in Altman’s films, no comprehensive study of the Altman women characters exists. Moreover, much of the critical attention given to Altman’s female characters has been negative, such as that aimed at “Hot Lips” O’Houlihan in *M*A*S*H*. The film’s characterization and treatment of the character, as well as other women characters in that film, were widely criticized. Rather than focusing on a single character or film, however, this research examines Altman’s films as a unified body of work that share overarching themes about women in American culture.

Moreover, the women characters in these films are examined through multiple critical lenses and theoretical frameworks, and are further contextualized against the cultural and social attitudes during the periods in which the films were created. Critical theories used in this study include Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism, reaccentuation, and heteroglossia; feminist film and literary theory; and, general film theory when necessary to examine the rhetorical effects of technology and the technological choices and practices of Altman in his filmmaking. The study is divided into three primary parts corresponding to specific periods and shifts in feminist thought.

This study is relevant because it contributes to our understanding of Altman's work as an American filmmaker and to our understanding of the roles played by film and visual literacy in our society's construction of meaning. Moreover, by studying Altman's films and the construction of female characters in his work, we can better grasp the dialogic relationship that exists between American audiences and the art – verbal and visual – the audiences help to create.

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CHAPTER I

ROBERT ALTMAN & THE WOMEN: MISOGYNIST OR MENTOR?

I've probably dealt with more female characters than most people, although I've done a few films with no women at all. But I grew up in a household of women . . . I suppose I'm more comfortable with women because of growing up that way, and I certainly learned how to manipulate them, or how to manipulate myself through their world. I don't pretend to know the working of the female mind, but I think, on balance, women are more interesting than men.

– Robert Altman in *Altman on Altman*

I'm not certain of the exact moment I realized there was something “different” about the women in Robert Altman's films, nor can I say with complete certainty which film led me to that “aha!” moment. However, one particular scene from *Nashville* has stayed with me for years and bears consideration for fostering that realization: it is the scene in the hotel room between Lily Tomlin's character Linnea and Keith Carradine's Tom. They are sharing an intimate conversation after making love when Linnea, a married gospel singer and the mother of a deaf child, asks Tom if he wants to learn to say something in sign language. He asks her how to say, “I love you,” so Linnea signs the phrase for him. Tom signs the phrase and murmurs, “I love you,” then waits for Linnea's response. She first signs the phrase again, and then quickly counters with “Or you could just say ‘I'm happy I met you.’” (*Nashville*). They talk a few minutes more, and then Linnea reaches for her watch and tells him she must leave. Tom asks her several times to “tell [your husband] you got hung up or something” and implores her to stay with him at least an hour longer.



Fig. 1. The Gospel Singer and the Womanizer. *From Nashville.*

Lily Tomlin's character, Linnea, teaches Keith Carradine's Tom to sign, "I love you," after the two have made love in his hotel room.



Fig. 2. Linnea Chooses to Leave. *From Nashville.*

After the encounter, Linnea is the one who decides when it is time to go, despite Tom's pleading with her to stay.

When Linnea refuses Tom's request and begins dressing to leave, he tries to make her jealous by calling another woman. The tactic fails, and Linnea walks out the door,

leaving Tom alone in his hotel bed. No longer motivated to continue the phone conversation with the other woman, Tom quickly ends the call. While some would read this scene as proof of Linnea's weakness since the womanizing Tom has seduced her, I read this scene as proof of Linnea's strength since she gets what she wants and then *chooses* to leave Tom alone in his hotel-room bed. Prior to this encounter between Tom and Linnea, we have watched Tom seduce several women, all of whom end up staying the night and extending their welcome in his bed. Linnea, however, is the only female to leave on her own terms – a sign of her independence and strength. However, she is not alone among the women in Altman films. Many similar scenes, or at least many scenes with similar meaning, can be found throughout Altman's films; and, these scenes and the women who fill them constitute the primary reason his films intrigue me.

In the closing scenes of *A Prairie Home Companion*, Altman's final film, the women—again—have the last word: Lola saves the show's final live performance with her last-minute improvisation of *Frankie and Johnnie*; Yolanda and Rhonda begin organizing a reunion performance of the long-since cancelled radio program; and the Dangerous Woman returns to claim another soul. Viewers familiar with Altman's work will note the inter-textual relationship that exists between *A Prairie Home Companion* and other Altman films: the trench-coat-wearing female “angel of death” first seen in *Brewster McCloud*; the detective and other film noir elements found in *The Long Goodbye* and *Kansas City*; the amateur female performer who takes the stage to save the show ala *Nashville*; and sharp-witted female characters who think, speak, and act for themselves—a character type that exists in most of Altman's major films. Not surprisingly, the women characters in Altman's films frequently have the last word.

Viewers will also note this final scene in *A Prairie Home Companion* reflects another theme that occurs frequently in Altman's films: when the final credits roll, the women have not only survived, but they also, in most instances, have prevailed.



Fig. 3. The Women Take the Stage. *From A Prairie Home Companion.*

Rhonda and Yolanda join Lola onstage during the closing moments of the final performance the celebrated radio show in *A Prairie Home Companion*. Pictured, left to right: Lily Tomlin, Meryl Streep, Lindsay Lohan, and Jearlyn Steele

More importantly, though, this recurring image of woman as survivor creates an impression that remains with audiences of Altman's films long after the credits have ended. As Kathleen Murphy asserts, "Altman's images work like poetic metaphors, each one webbing in and outward of its home-film, an ever-widening gyre that takes in his whole oeuvre" (20). In the truest sense possible, Altman's films are in continual dialogue with one another and with the American audiences for whom they have been created.

Robert Altman: A Distinctly "American" Filmmaker

Altman's film career spans six decades and comprises thirty-six feature films that represent many of the most revered genres in American filmmaking. These genres include science fiction, the war film, the western, film noir or the detective mystery, the historical epic, the crime or gangster film, and the musical or dance film. Regardless of

the genre to which they belong, though, Altman's films generally¹ share many distinguishing features: large, ensemble casts; multilayered and overlapping soundtracks; and a lyrical style of storytelling, which seems to defy conventional understandings of narrative structure. While Altman is frequently quoted as having said he finds people more interesting than plot,² the narrative structure of many Altman films is still noteworthy due to the manner in which the plot is developed. Maurice Yacowar claims that in Altman films, the director invites actors to participate in "a community that will create his film" (27) and thus contribute to the story the film will ultimately tell. Through this dialogue between director and actors, according to Yacowar, Altman "exploits . . . diverse connotations in his treatment . . . of actors, [creates] an approach that enables him continually to challenge his viewers' habitual responses, . . . [and] inflects his material so as to undermine the security of familiar assumptions" (27).

However, the conversation Altman invites is not limited to the participants acting in and working on his films; the conversation Altman invites also extends to the audiences viewing his films, most especially the American audience. As Helene Keyssar notes, ". . . the Altman signature is emphatically and specifically American, both in the territories it explores and in its styles of exploration. . . . Altman's work for film and television is a blatantly seductive invitation to all Americans to engage in a conversation

¹ Of course, there are notable exceptions to this; Altman's film adaptations of *Secret Honor* and *Streamers* come to mind rather quickly. However, *most* of Altman's feature films do feature ensemble casts as well as overlapping and interwoven plot lines and multilayered soundtracks.

² See for example Betty Jefferies Demby's "Robert Altman Talks About His Life and Art" from the June 19, 1977 edition of *The New York Times*. Altman is quoted in this article as saying "I cannot do *Rocky* or *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and all those films where there's no question about the way the audience is going to feel at the end. I think sad people laugh, happy people cry, and brave people are frightened. Cowards are brave. There's total contradiction. The minute you take the surprise away, there's no art. The minute you plot something and say this is going to be this way because of this, you're wrong." (Zuckoff 324)

about the past, present, and future of the promised land” (5). Indeed, the social and geographical landscapes created by Altman belong to a particular period in American culture—a period his American audience knows all too well.



Fig. 4. One of Altman’s American Landscapes. *From Fool for Love.*

Altman’s *Fool for Love* depicts one of the filmmaker’s many visions of the American cultural landscape—this one, a run-down motel along a rural American highway.

Making Meaning: Dialogism and Cognitive Theory

In addition, while this “blatantly seductive invitation” is significant, the audience’s role extends beyond the “conversation” encouraged by and about Altman’s films. Film theorists Martin Baker and Thomas Austin claim “film watching is a social role that audiences perform . . . What goes on when we watch a film is partly concerned with how the film was constructed and partly with how we [viewers] perform our role” (87-88) in constructing the meaning of any given film. Further, while earlier film theorists, and the public in general, tended to either ignore the power of movies or condemn the “apparently mindless, sensual, and affective pleasures of film viewing” (Gledhill and Williams 2), many contemporary scholars define the movie-going experience as a concrete, physical experience with distinctive, and historically changing, sensory appeal.

Many cognitive theorists agree: a film's audience is not passive. In fact, "the cognitive operations called thinking are not the privilege of mental processes above and beyond perception but the essential ingredients for perception itself" (Arnheim 13). Further, Bill Nichols argues in *Film Theory and the Revolt against Master Narratives* that "Recognition of visual culture as a field of study acknowledges appeals to the senses as a form of knowledge production" (Gledhill and Williams 41). In other words, film audiences are not passive receptacles into which images and utterances are streamed at the rate of twenty-four frames per second; film audiences are actively engaged in constructing meaning throughout, and even beyond, the immediate film-watching experience. Given this conception of audience and its role in knowledge construction, the critical question motivating this study becomes this: What role does the American audience play in the shaping of the discursive act that is the creation of women in Altman's films?

Rhetoricians have long recognized and acknowledged the importance of an external audience, either real or imagined, in shaping the rhetorical and stylistic choices one makes when creating a rhetorical artifact. This understanding of the rhetorical role an audience plays in shaping discourse can be traced to the early sophists, including Protagoras of Abdera, Gorgias of Leontini, as well as other rhetoricians in Ancient Greece and Rome. In the twentieth century, Russian cultural philosopher and language theorist Mikhail Bakhtin argued that a discursive act has multiple audiences, and all these audiences engage in a dialogic process that results in the construction of meaning. According to Bakhtin, the audience, or observer, through the process of observing and understanding a discursive act, becomes a participant in the dialogue:

. . . Dialogic relations are thus much broader than dialogic speech in the narrow sense of the word. And dialogic relations are always present, even among profoundly monologic speech works. . . . The person who understands becomes a participant in the dialogue, although on a special level. . . . The observer has no position *outside* the observed world, and his observation enters as a constituent part into the observed object. This pertains fully to entire utterances and relations among them. They cannot be understood from outside. Understanding itself enters as a dialogic element in the dialogic system and somehow changes its total sense. The person who understands inevitably becomes a *third* party in the dialogue (of course, not in any literal, arithmetical sense, for there can be, in addition to a third, an unlimited number of participants in the dialogue being understood) . . .

(“Problem of the Text in Linguistics” 125-126)

Following Bakhtin’s argument, then, each time we watch a movie we engage in a dialogue with that film, and through our participation in this internal dialogue between ourselves and the movie, we create meaning through our own contextualization of the images, sounds, and movement our brains perceive.

Social and linguistic theorists also recognize the significance of the external audience in constructing the meaning of a text. Moreover, according to many of these theorists, writers—or in the case of movies, a film’s director—must create the public they are addressing with and through their creative works. According to Phyllis Mentzell Ryder, in *Rhetorics for Community Action*, a “public” is formed when people “come together with particular visions of people’s roles;” and, “public writers . . . have to invent the publics they wish to address” (5-6). Ryder’s argument echoes those voiced by many rhetoricians and language theorists such as Wayne Booth, Walter Ong, Russell Clark,

Andrea Lunsford, and Lisa Ede, as well as others.³ According to these theorists, the audience of a work—as well as the audience’s role and response to that work—is created by the author of a work through the rhetorical choices that author makes in creating a text. According to Booth’s *Rhetoric of Fiction*, artists do not write, or create art, merely for themselves:

It is not, after all, only an image of himself that the author creates. Every stroke implying his second self will help to mold the reader [or viewer] into the kind of person suited to appreciate such a character and the book [movie] he is writing [creating]. (89)

Accepting the *auteur theory* as a given, a film’s director provides the primary voice and vision guiding the creation of a motion picture and therefore assumes the authorial function of creating a film’s audience and defining the role that audience will play in the construction of meaning.

Altman’s Films and Their Social Contexts

While the director and primary audience are significant in determining a film’s meaning, the social context into which the film enters also performs a crucial function; and though there are acknowledged differences between novels or other written texts and filmic texts, there are also significant similarities in the conception of authorship and audience role in both media. Moreover, both written texts and filmic texts rely on discourse to construct and convey meaning, be it plot or character relationships. In “Discourse in the Novel,” Mikhail Bakhtin argues that creative works such as novels

³ See for example Wayne Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction*; Walter Ong’s “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction,” Russell Long’s “Writer-Audience Relationships: Analysis or Invention?,” and Andrea Lunsford’s and Lisa Ede’s “Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy.”

interact with their dialogizing background, or social context to create meaning. Bakhtin labels this interaction between a text and its dialogizing background re-accentuation (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 363), arguing that this re-accentuation can “affect or enrich the meaning of a work” (429). The same interaction occurs between a filmic text and its dialogizing background.

According to Bakhtin, language is never neutral; and all transformations of language—including the images created by and through language, such as novels, films, and other texts, including specific characters—enter our consciousness through one of two processes: canonization or re-accentuation (Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel” 417-418). While the canonization of some linguistic elements is inevitable over time, Bakhtin contends that canonization results in the loss of heteroglossia to some degree. Conversely, re-accentuation maintains the heteroglossic nature of language and thus preserves the voices of the others in society.



Fig. 5. Using Shadows and Light to Re-Accentuate Phillip Marlowe. *From The Long Goodbye*

Altman’s use of color and lighting in *The Long Goodbye* illustrates one of the ways in which the director uses visual elements in the film to re-contextualize—that is, reaccentuate—Chandler’s 1953 detective novel for audiences in 1973. In this shot Marlowe, representing the novel’s original early 1950s context, is captured in gray-scale silhouette overlooking a contemporary beach scene filled with color and light, evoking the film’s 1970s context and setting. Pictured: Elliot Gould as Phillip Marlowe

For Bakhtin, heteroglossia, or internal differentiation within a single language, is crucial for maintaining “speech diversity” (“From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse” 67) and preserving the voices of the others in a society. Further, re-accentuation imbues the creative images of language with new meanings as literary works are continually re-contextualized in other epochs; and, it preserves the voice of the other, thereby maintaining the heteroglossic nature of language. Robert Altman’s films function in much the same way. In *Robert Altman’s America*, Helene Keyssar argues, “The power in Altman’s films is not in melting diversity in the pot of American culture but in the interanimation of authentically conflicting voices” (5). She further invokes Bakhtin and the concept of polyphony in analyzing not only the relationships between characters in Altman movies, but also the relationship between Altman’s characters and Altman’s audience. “The undermining of genre, the celebration of polyphony—multivoicedness—and openness of discourse that for Bakhtin distinguish novels from all other cultural actions, are as explicit in Altman’s films as these gestures are ‘pure’ in Bakhtin’s Dostoyevski” (Keyssar, *Robert Altman’s America* 38).

Further, Robert Self argues in his *Cinema Journal* article, “Robert Altman and the Concept of Authorship,” Altman’s films capture the essence of their particular epoch through their dialogized relationship with their particular context and maintain the heteroglossic nature of language through the creation of a counter discourse in the film industry. Self contends Altman’s films:

constitute a sub-code of the Hollywood fringe; they register another voice in the system of deals, egos, production values, and stars of the film industry . . . [they]

are radar pings bouncing off the hulls of Hollywood tonnage, they are even more clearly authored by the social voices of the 1970s . . .(6)

If, as Self contends, Altman's films represent a counter-discourse to the conventional Hollywood film industry, then how are we to read the women characters constructed in and through his films? What "truths" do these cinematic representations convey to audiences about the Hollywood film industry and the American culture that shares a symbiotic relationship with that industry? What role does the audience play in determining these truths?

What Have Critics Said about Altman's Films?

While scholars have occasionally focused on examining Altman's films as counter-discourse within the film industry, they have rarely—if ever—examined the dialogic relationship that exists between an Altman film, the filmmaker himself, and the film's audience. Some of the more common themes and approaches shared among much of the critical scholarship on Altman's work include: literary perspectives on genre studies and the corruption of genre conventions; the idea of authorship; the director's frequent use of ensemble casts; and the innovative technical aspects of his films, such as the use of multi-layered soundtracks or Altman's preference for filming with a "wandering lens." Further, many scholars and critics alike have noted the distinctly "American" vision of the cultural landscape created in Altman films, which I contend proves the existence of a close relationship between the director and his American audiences.

While some critical attention has been given to several of the women characters in his early films, no comprehensive study of these characters or their significance within

the context of American culture exists. Further, much of the critical attention given to Altman's female characters has been negative. For example, following the release of Altman's first critically acclaimed and popularly successful film *M*A*S*H*, the film's characterization and treatment of Margaret "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan and other female characters in the film were widely criticized by feminist thinkers in the academic world and beyond. The image of a female commissioned officer of the United States Army, naked in the shower in front of both male and female members of her company, was seared into the consciousness of audiences.



Fig. 6. "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan's Notorious Shower Scene. *From M*A*S*H.*

Several men in the company have rigged the tent so they can raise the sides when "Hot Lips" showers one morning. To her utter horror, not only is she naked and exposed, but she also is center stage for the makeshift audience watching. Altman uses a fog filter in shooting the scene to recreate the hazy, dirty look and feel of war; and, as an unintended result, this filter also softens the appearance of the character's nudity. Pictured: Sally Kellerman as Margaret "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan

In fact, criticism of the depiction and treatment of the female characters in *M*A*S*H* was so pervasive that Altman frequently related an incident in which he was harshly criticized by a group of university students during the early 1970s. As the director relates in *Altman on Altman*, "I remember once, in front of about five thousand students, I was accused of being a misogynist. They were asking how could I treat women in this

way. I said, ‘I don’t treat women that way. I’m showing you the way I observed women were treated, and still are treated’ (47). In spite of Altman’s explanation, this infamous scene is frequently remembered and cited, by movie viewers and critics alike, as a prime example in support of the argument that Altman’s depiction of women is problematic.

Are the criticism and misogynist label directed at Altman and his work deserved? Or, could it be this early criticism of the women in Altman’s *M*A*S*H* effected the director’s depiction and development of female characters in later films? Women in the film industry who have worked with the director apparently do not consider the man or his work misogynistic: he was presented a Mentor Award by the Women in Film organization in November 2001 for his body of work. The organization’s announcement of the award reads, in part:

“It is especially fitting for Women in Film to honor Robert Altman with the 2001 Mentor Award since he has been at the forefront of discovering, nurturing and showcasing some of the most important women working in entertainment for more than five decades,” said WIF president Hollace Davids. (Zuckoff 464)

The award also is remarkable as the organization’s Mentor Award is only presented “every few years . . . [to] extraordinary men in the entertainment industry who have contributed to the growth of opportunities for women in the industry by recognizing and rewarding their talents and achievements” (WomeninFilm.org); the award is not an “annual presentation” for which the organization *must* find a worthy recipient each year. Consequently, it hardly seems fitting that a true misogynist would be honored with such an award—an award that is presented by and on behalf of professional women working in the film industry. Evidence suggests the early criticism aimed at Altman and

*M*A*S*H*—particularly the misogynist label—left an indelible mark on the director’s psyche as he would frequently mention the early criticism in interviews throughout his decades-spanning career; however, late in his career these references became more humorous. At the Toronto Film Festival in 2000, when *Dr. T and the Women* was screened, Altman reportedly told the audience at the beginning of his talk: “I just want to say one thing. If anyone in this room has a question about misogyny, I want to just point out that this film was written by a woman” (Zuckoff 463).

Altman’s Career

Altman’s career in the film industry began as an actor in the late 1940s with several small parts in films. His acting career was short-lived, however, and in 1950, he returned to Kansas City where he was hired by the Calvin Company to make short, industrial films on a wide range of subjects. While working at the Calvin Company, Altman made his feature film debut as a director with *The Delinquents* (1957); he also directed and produced the documentary *The James Dean Story* (1957) during this period. Altman left the Calvin Company in late 1956 and returned to Hollywood, where he found work in television, first directing several episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* before moving on to *Whirlybirds*. In addition to his work on *Hitchcock* and *Whirlybirds*, Altman’s television directing credits include *The Millionaire*, *U.S. Marshall*, *The Roaring 20s*, *Bonanza*, *Combat*, *The Kraft Mystery Theatre*, *The Kraft Suspense Theatre*, as well as many other series that aired during the late 1950s and early to mid-1960s.

Throughout his years working in the television industry, Altman honed his skills as a director, mastering the art of filming on tight deadlines and working with limited budgets. Moreover, the technical knowledge of photography and film processing Altman

acquired during his years of creating industrial films for the Calvin Company, and through his work directing episodic television programs, is clearly illustrated in his films. For example, in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1970) and *The Long Goodbye* (1973), Altman's use of color, lighting, filtering, and post-flash processing allows these films to visually communicate the social context he is creating in and through these movies. Furthermore, Altman's work in episodic television and industrial films provided him not only with the directorial credits needed to launch a motion picture career, but it also provided him with the technical knowledge and experience needed to distinguish his films and provide them with a distinct Altmanesque look, as illustrated in the following screen captures from *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and *The Long Goodbye*:



Fig. 7. Altman's Groundbreaking Vision of the American West. *From McCabe & Mrs. Miller.*

Altman's use of color and lighting in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* conveys the gritty, bleak environment of the American West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as he perceives it. Altman's depiction of the American West is considered visually stunning in its realism, and it is credited as a primary influence inspiring the look and feel of later westerns such as the HBO series *Deadwood*.



Fig. 8. 1970s Southern California Beach Party. *From The Long Goodbye.*

Altman's use of post-flash processing in *The Long Goodbye* creates the hyper-saturated, sun-washed colors of the self-indulgent lifestyle in 1970s Southern California. Pictured (L-R): Sterling Hayden, Elliott Gould, Nina Van Pallandt, and Henry Gibson

Altman's first major studio film, *Countdown* (1968), was released as a companion feature to the John Wayne film *The Green Berets* and was largely ignored by critics and audiences. According to Altman, he was fired by the studio, Warner Brothers, before the final editing of *Countdown* was complete; although Warner Brothers denies Altman was ever fired, the studio did have additional work done on the film under the direction of William Conrad (McGilligan 274-275). Altman's next feature film, *That Cold Day in the Park* (1969), was essentially an independent film co-produced by Donald Factor and Leon Mirrell; studio-funded, albeit with a very small budget, *M*A*S*H* followed in 1970. The success of studio-backed *M*A*S*H*, the director's third Hollywood feature film, provided Altman a solid foothold on which to build his career; thirty-three more feature films—some successful, some not; some good, some not—would follow.

Altman and the Women: Characters, Actors, and Audiences

Despite Altman's expansive filmography and the number of memorable women characters created in his movies, relatively little critical scholarship has been written about the majority of his women characters. There are a few notable exceptions among Altman's women: Constance Miller in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, Margaret O'Houlihan in *M*A*S*H*, most all the women in *Nashville*, and Pinky, Millie, and Willie in *3 Women* all have been discussed in multiple scholarly, critical, and popular media sources. Yet, among all the books and articles discussing Altman's films, only one book chapter, "The Feminization of Altman's Films" in Helene Keyssar's *Robert Altman's America*, examines Altman's women through a feminist lens. Moreover, Keyssar's work was published in 1991 and focuses almost exclusively on the director's early works, specifically *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and the movies Keyssar labels "Altman's women films:" *That Cold Day in the Park*, *3 Women*, and *Images*. However, aside from this discussion provided by Keyssar and a handful of scholarly journal articles, very little has been written about Altman's women.

Altman's early feature films with notable women characters include the aforementioned *That Cold Day in the Park* (1969); *M*A*S*H* (1970); *Brewster McCloud* (1970); *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971); *Images* (1972); *Thieves Like Us* (1974); *Nashville* (1975); and *3 Women* (1977). These films and the early years of Altman's Hollywood film career emerge from and contribute to the rise of independent filmmaking in the American movie industry. During the late 1960s, independent filmmaking began to replace the powerful studio model and star system under which Hollywood had operated for five decades (Monaco, *The Sixties* 19-20), and directors exercised more creative

freedom than they had been permitted in the past. Although *M*A*S*H* was financed by a major Hollywood studio, it was a small-budget production when compared with other studio films of the same period. Further, the studio financing *M*A*S*H*, Twentieth Century Fox, had two other war movies in production at the same time; the “other war movies” were the big-budget features *Patton* and *Tora! Tora! Tora!*. By contrast, according to Altman, “[*M*A*S*H*] was a cheap picture that Fox thought would just play in drive-ins, and they didn’t care too much about it” (*Altman on Altman* 45). As a result, according to Altman, he was given a great deal of freedom in filming *M*A*S*H*, and the movie looks and feels more like an independent film than it does a major-studio release.

Altman’s background in industrial films and television had prepared him well for the role independent filmmaker, and his distinct style of filmmaking seemed a custom fit for the indie-film market. By the early 1970s, the decline of the studio system had led to greater creative freedom for independent filmmakers; and, social conditions in the United States had led to changes in the perspectives of American audiences. Actress Julie Christie, who appears in numerous Altman films, describes the “new” American audience of the early 1970s as “an audience that had been politicized by Vietnam and Watergate . . . whose consciousness had been changed with drugs—and I think that’s important. It was an open audience” (*A Decade under the Influence*). The dialogic relationship that exists between audience, film, and filmmaker and the role this dialogic relationship plays in the construction of meaning are significant; however, little has been written on this aspect of Altman’s work in the film industry.

Altman's Films and Evolving Feminist Theory

As previously mentioned, the popular and academic response to the character Margaret “Hot Lips” O’Houlihan in *M*A*S*H* was critical, and Altman later claimed his intentions for representing the character in his film had been misunderstood. Still the character and the film are often cited as evidence to support the claim that the depiction of women in Altman’s films is at best problematic, and at worst, downright misogynistic. However, these claims have rarely been explored or in depth or examined within the context of Altman’s body of work; they have only been discussed within the context of specific films.



Fig. 9. The Notorious Shower Scene’s “Audience”. *From M*A*S*H.*

Altman insists his intention in *M*A*S*H* was to illustrate the way women are treated—in the military specifically—and in American culture generally. It was never intended to demonstrate the way he believes women should be treated, he has said. This scene, with men *and* women waiting to witness O’Houlihan’s exposure and their celebrations of her humiliation seem to support this claim.

How could anyone misunderstand the image of Sally Kellerman as the shocked, humiliated army nurse, Margaret O’Houlihan, huddled nude in the shower trying to conceal as much of her body as possible while dozens of male soldiers stood staring at

her, cheering the childish prank executed at her expense? Clearly, an audience should be able to determine who the sympathetic character is in that scene, right? Altman's *M*A*S*H* premiered in December of 1970, amid a rapidly changing cultural conception of "feminine" and "feminist." In the three-to-four years preceding the premier of Altman's film, the National Organization of Women had been formed; the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution had been proposed; and, feminists in New York had staged a large and widely publicized protest of the Miss America Pageant in which they crowned a live sheep "Miss America." Moreover, in the same year Altman's film premiered, 1970, three texts central to feminism's second wave were published: Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful*, and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*. Perhaps this social context, into and from which the film emerged, led to the "misunderstanding" of Altman's depiction of Margaret "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan in the film. It is ironic that while many critics quickly recognized the film's treatment of the subject of war as darkly comedic satire, critics and audiences alike failed to perceive the film's depiction of women in the same satiric light. Many feminists among the scholarly and non-scholarly community alike were offended by the film's—and ultimately what they considered to be the director's—depiction and treatment of female characters.⁴ Clearly, the criticism and the misogynist label troubled Altman as it is mentioned in most published interviews with the director. Further, few—if any—of the director's women characters in the films that follow *M*A*S*H* in the 1970s have much, if anything, in common with 'Hot Lips' O'Houlihan.

⁴ This is evidenced in countless movie reviews published when the films were released as well as in numerous scholarly journal articles, many of which are discussed in later chapters of this study.

By the early to mid-1980s, the idea of feminism was changing, due in part to two legal and political actions: the passage in Congress of the Equal Rights Amendment and the Supreme Court's ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, leading many to believe the battle for gender equality had been won. Further, many others argued that the radical feminism of the 1960s and 1970s expressed a victim mentality and marginalized women even further. Still others claimed second-wave feminism was no longer relevant to the young women who came of age during the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁵ The term most commonly used to describe feminist philosophy of the 1980s is postfeminism, although this label as well as its definition is frequently contested among feminists and scholars.

Postfeminism of the 1980s is best understood as a response to—thus establishing a dialogic relationship with—the “radical” feminists and feminism of the women's liberation movement of 1960s and 1970s. It is interesting to note that during this period, several of Altman's major films include only male characters, for example, *Streamers* (1983) and *Secret Honor* (1984), while others include female characters in minor roles, such as *O.C. and Stiggs* (1985). However, during this period, many of Altman's films are not “original” works. Rather, they are filmic adaptations of stage plays; and, several of these films do include some of Altman's most interesting female characters, including Cher's Joanne in *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982) and Kim Basinger's May in *Fool for Love* (1985). Further, *Health* (1980) is intended to be a satire of the 1950s- presidential election between Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson;

⁵ For in-depth discussion of the social and political issues surrounding the waves in feminist thought and contested definitions of postfeminism and third-wave feminism, see Carisa Showden's “What's Political about the New Feminism,” Jenny Coleman's “An Introduction to Feminisms in a Postfeminist Age,” and “Writing the Waves: A Dialogue on the Tools, Tactics, and Tensions of Feminisms and Feminist Practices over Time and Place,” among many other works discussing the waves in feminist thought and action.

however, the context has been changed and the main characters are women rather than men. How are these films and the women characters in them related to the post-feminist dialogue that emerges in the 1980s? Is there some significance to be found in the fact that some films include no women characters while others include some of Altman's most compelling women to date?

The term widely used to classify feminist ideology and actions in the period that began roughly around 1980 is "postfeminism." Postfeminism, understood as a response to what had been considered the radical second-wave of feminist thought in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, was once thought to extend from its inception in the early 1980s through today. Now, however, identifying the periods and their distinctions regarding feminist thought is more complicated. Feminism's third wave, arising in the early 1990s and initially understood as an extension of the early postfeminist ideology expressed in the 1980s, is much more complex. Precise definitions of and distinctions between both postfeminism and third-wave feminism are contested among feminists and often overlap.⁶ However, it should be noted that the most widely accepted description of post-feminist thought is one that allows for and recognizes pluralities and contradictions within and among women's experiences. Indeed, third-wave feminism recognizes a broad range of feminist concerns, concerns that transcend boundaries of race, culture, and age, and it seeks to reclaim any and all female roles and labels—including those roles and labels which might be perceived as negative. Altman's major films from this period

⁶ For a detailed history of the various and contested meanings and application of the concept of postfeminism, particularly as the concept relates to media studies and popular culture, see Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra's "Post-feminism in Contemporary Media Studies" in *Cinema Journal* (2005), Rosalind Gill's "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility" in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2007), and Fien Adriaens "Post-Feminism is Popular Culture: A Potential for Critical Resistance?" in *Politics and Culture* (2009).

reflect these pluralities of women's experiences; these films include *Vincent & Theo* (1990), *The Player* (1992), *Short Cuts* (1993), *Prêt-à-Porter* (1994), *Kansas City* (1996), *Dr. T and the Women* (2000), *Gosford Park* (2001), *The Company* (2003), and *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006). It is interesting to note that Altman's female characters during this period represent a diverse group of women in terms of socio-economic and professional status, which includes models, fashion designers, dancers, artists, executives, gangsters, mothers, performers, and even a phone sex "prostitute."

Based on the social and contextual nature of language—and thus creative "products of language" such as films—it is understood that truly dialogic discourse can highlight contradictions and agreements in seemingly opposing voices. Likewise, a feminist dialogic can be used to highlight and encourage "the disruption and critique of dominant, oppressive ideologies" (Bauer and McKinstry 3). Bauer and McKinstry further extend their argument about a feminist dialogic, noting that it provides a "critique of monolithic views of feminism that are implicit in some feminist theories and explicit in the often stereotypical representation of feminism in contemporary culture" (4). By virtue of extending this theory, then, a true feminist dialogic recognizes and accepts as being "valid" a character such as Jennifer Jason Leigh's Lois Kaiser in *Short Cuts*, who sells phone sex to support her family and supplement the income provided by her husband's work cleaning and servicing swimming pools. In fact, the sub-text of Lois's story invites viewers to hold Lois in higher esteem than her male partner in the film, in spite of her occupation—or perhaps it is *because* Lois's occupation helps audiences contextualize her experience.



Fig. 10. Selling Phone Sex While Feeding the Baby. *From Short Cuts.*

In the film *Shortcuts*, Lois Kaiser supplements her family's income by selling phone sex while caring for her husband and children and is depicted as a more sympathetic and likeable character than her husband. Kaiser's husband, Jerry, is seen desecrating the body of a young woman found in the water when fishing with friends, and later attacking a young woman in the park while on a family picnic. Pictured: Jennifer Jason Leigh

Contrasted against the depiction of Margaret "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan in *M*A*S*H*, who is remembered by most audiences as being humiliated and hysterical, Lois Kaiser presents a different picture of what it means to be a woman. Lois Kaiser is depicted as independent, self-sufficient, and confident. She clearly represents the ideology behind third-wave feminism, which argues for more diverse conceptions of women's roles, allowing for differing viewpoints on issues both public and private. And, she is not alone among Altman's women. Altman's films from this period include many women characters that demonstrate and represent this ideology. What is the significance of these characters? How should audiences understand them? What does their presence in Altman's films communicate about American culture and the social context of third-wave feminist theory?

Altman's Women, Critical Theory, and Some Conclusions

As film scholar Roy Stafford explains in *Understanding Audiences and the Film Industry*, there exists in film studies no single, “grand theory . . . that would explain everything” (83), so it would be impossible to limit this examination of Altman's women characters to a single theoretical perspective. Instead, these characters must be examined using multiple critical and theoretical lenses so that a more robust understanding of their significance might be achieved. One such lens would be that created through the philosophic and linguistic theories established by Mikhail Bakhtin's *Discourse in the Novel*, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, *Speech Genres*, and *Art and Answerability*—theories of language that argue for a multi-voiced discourse based on the dialogic exchange between “others” of ideas and experiences. Feminist theory in general and feminist film and literary theory in particular provide context for the study; general film theory is necessary to examine the rhetorical effects of technology and the technological choices and practices of Altman in his filmmaking; and, rhetorical theory—particularly the concepts of audience and audience/author relationships—provide the basis for connecting the elements of literary, feminist, and film theory and for understanding the relationship between Altman, his films, and his films' audiences. Following this same logic, focusing on a single film, or even a small group of films from a particular genre or decade, would provide only limited understanding of these characters, the director's films, and the social context to which they belong. To grasp the significance of the director's films and the dialogic relationship between his films and American audiences, it is important to examine Altman's films as a single, unified body of work and consider the inter-textual relationships between the works collectively. Altman's work must be

studied as a unified body produced over time in a particular culture since, as Stafford argues in *Understanding Audiences and the Film Industry*, “. . . it is not the immediate effects of watching a single film that are important, but the development of an understanding of film culture over time” (131) that matters.

Establishing the connection between Altman’s filmmaking techniques, the female characters created in his films, and the social context in which the films were created is an important element of this study. As Altman himself explains, nothing “in film [is] completely instinctual for me, as I’ve done so much. Every one of these things I do, whatever they are, these little techniques, have been done for some reason” (*Altman on Altman* 49). Altman has frequently been labeled a distinctly American filmmaker—that is, one who is concerned with presenting the American cultural landscape in his films and who relies on some understanding of American traditions in society as well as the conventions of American art and literature. Further, as both an observer and a participant in American culture, Altman establishes a dialogic relationship with American audiences, and his films provide a distinctly Altmanesque view of life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Close examination of Altman’s women characters contributes to our understanding of the personal, social, economic, and political roles of women in this period, and it contributes to our understanding of the roles played by film and visual literacy in our construction of meaning. As bell hooks notes about her own college teaching experience, “. . . students [learn] more about race, sex, and class from movies than from all the theoretical literature I [urge] them to read . . . [movies] provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues” (hooks, *Reel to Reel* 2).

By studying Altman's films and the construction of female characters in his work, we can better grasp the dialogic relationship that exists between American audiences and the art—verbal and visual—the audiences help to create. Further, as one of the most prolific and distinctly American filmmakers of the late twentieth century Altman's films play a crucial role in defining and reflecting American cinematic and—more importantly—American cultural perspectives about women. As Patricia Yeager argues in the "Afterword" of *Feminism, Bakhtin and the Dialogic*, one of the most important goals for a feminist dialogics is to raise awareness and acceptance of a diverse feminist speech world (241). I would argue that such a diverse feminist speech world exists in the films of Robert Altman, making them worthy of further study. Helene Keyssar would agree. "[It] is this attempt [by Altman] to reorder the location of American women and men on film, an attempt that both initiates and requires imagining radical transformations of American culture, that merits further pursuit" (47). And finally, this study is not intended to produce a single or *monologic* analysis of the women in Robert Altman's films; rather, it is intended to enhance our understanding of these women and open the dialogue about their significance in reflecting and shaping American culture.

CHAPTER II

ROBERT ALTMAN & THE CRITICS: ALTERNATIVE CINEMA AUTEUR

“Altman throughout his career has made the most intellectually honest films about the American experience of any director since Orson Wells.”

— David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*

As a director, Altman is perhaps best known for creating films that are—at their core—subversions of Hollywood traditions and genre conventions and for his probing exploration and realistic depiction of American culture and values. In the thirty-four feature films discussed in this study, Altman creates more than four-hundred women characters with speaking roles—many of them featured in leading roles—who exist in a variety of filmic worlds that reflect the fluidity of the American landscape during the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. Given the considerable number and diverse range of female characters represented in Altman’s filmography, it is surprising that relatively little critical scholarship focusing on these women characters has been published. Film scholars and industry professionals consider Robert Altman one of the most influential American filmmakers of the late twentieth century, and the scarcity of scholarship about the women in Altman’s films creates a gap in film studies. Thus, the objective of this literature review is twofold: first, to provide an overview of published critical scholarship on Altman’s body of work; and, second, to illustrate the need for an in-depth study of the women characters in Altman’s films. Although Altman is listed as the director of thirty-six feature films, two films are excluded from this study. *The Delinquents* is excluded as it is separated from the rest of his directing career by a little more than ten years, and it is not available either commercially or privately for screening. *Aria* is also excluded from this study; the film is a collection of short operatic pieces

featuring the work of ten different directors. Altman's contribution is a segment that is just under ten minutes in length, making it more of a short film than a feature film. The remaining thirty-four feature films will be examined—albeit in varying degrees of depth—in this study.

The primary sources informing this study will be Altman's films, the director's commentary on particular films—when available on DVDs, and published interviews with the director. Interviews used as source material include several notable individual interviews as well as collections of multiple interviews with Altman conducted by a single interviewer. While these film and interview sources will not be reviewed in this chapter, they will be used to provide context and commentary for the various films as those films are analyzed and discussed in this study. Relevant interviews and collections include: *Altman on Altman*, a collection of interviews with Altman conducted and edited by David Thompson; *Robert Altman Interviews*, interviews conducted and edited by David Sterritt; "Robert Altman" from *Inner Views: Filmmakers in Conversation*, interviews conducted and edited by David Breskin; "A Pinewood Dialogue with Robert Altman" from the Museum of the Moving Image, conducted and edited by David Schwartz; "Still up to Mischief" from *Guardian Film Unlimited*, conducted and edited by Suzie Mackenzie; *Playboy's* "Interview: Robert Altman – Candid Conversation," conducted by Bruce Williamson; "*The Player*: An Interview with Robert Altman," conducted by Janice Richolson; and, *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography*, by Mitchell Zuckoff, a biography constructed of interviews with Altman as well as those who worked with him throughout his career. This source is particularly useful to any study of Altman's work as it includes more recent commentary and interviews with actors and

film industry professionals arranged chronologically by time periods in the director's career, with sections devoted to each film. Zuckoff's *Oral Biography* also includes some excerpts from critical reviews of the director's films that were published at the time of the films' original release dates.

In addition to the aforementioned primary sources, other previously published interviews with the director also are included in discussions in later chapters where relevant. Secondary sources consulted include criticism and scholarship on Altman's work; film theory texts; technical discussions and analyses of the director's work by other film industry professionals; and, informative feature articles, film reviews, and obituaries from popular media sources. One recent source that falls somewhere between a primary and a secondary source is the 2014 text *Altman* by Katherine Altman, the director's widow, and coauthored by film critic Giulia D'Agnola Vallan, with an introduction by Martin Scorsese. This large, ten-by-twelve-inch, text includes an extensive collection of photos from the private archives of the Altman family chronicling the director's life and film career. Most of the photographs were taken on set at the various filming locations and feature captions and commentary by Katherine Altman as well as by actors and industry professionals who worked with Altman on the various films. This work is arranged chronologically by film release dates. The book's publisher, Abrams Books, classifies the text as a "visual biography," but the contribution this text provides to this project lies in the commentary contributed by actors and industry professionals. Further, the book also includes photo reproductions of newspaper clippings about Altman's movies, written and published around the time of the films' original release dates.

What about the Women?

While several women from Altman's earlier films are frequently referenced when the director's work is being discussed and or analyzed,¹ these characters are most often considered only superficially and within the framework of existing filmic and literary stereotypes, such as the hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold (Constance Miller in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*), the groupie (L. A. Joan in *Nashville*), the femme-fatale (Eileen Wade in *The Long Goodbye*), the obsessed "stalker" (Frances Austen in *That Cold Day in the Park* and Pinky Rose in *3 Women*), and other characters tagged with similarly limiting labels.

Moreover, among the articles, essays, and books written about Altman's work, only two book chapters, "The Feminization of Altman's Films" in Helene Keyssar's *Robert Altman's America* and "Resisting Women: Madness, Dreams, and Art" in Robert Self's *Robert Altman's Subliminal Reality*, and a handful of journal articles specifically examine the director's women characters in anything more than a superficial manner. The value of Keyssar's work today is limited by its age and range: the book was published in 1991, and the aforementioned chapter focuses almost exclusively on the director's early works, specifically, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, and the movies Keyssar labels "Altman's women films:" *That Cold Day in the Park*, *3 Women*, *Images*, and *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*. While Keyssar's work examines only a few films, her study is conducted and presented from a feminist perspective. Self's work, which examines a larger body of Altman's films and provides a close reading of many of the

¹ The women characters most frequently mentioned when Altman's work is examined are: Constance Miller in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971); Margaret "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan in *M*A*S*H* (1970); and, Pinky, Millie, and Willie in *3 Women* (1977). There are also a few women characters who are mentioned less frequently, including any one or more of the women characters in *Nashville* (1975) and Cathryn and Susannah in *Images* (1972).

director's best-known films, focuses his study on the ways in which Altman exploits genre conventions. Further, his examination of Altman's characters, both women and men, focuses on the social construction of identity and cultural alienation, which opposes theories of dialogism and agency since, according to Self, the characters abandon agency for isolation.

In addition to the works by Keyssar and Self that focus exclusively on Altman's films, there are a limited number of scholarly or critical essay examining Altman's women characters; these essays include Marsha Kinder's "The Art of Dreaming in *Three* [sic] *Women* and *Providence*: Structures of the Self" from the Autumn 1977 issue of *Film Quarterly*; Krin Gabbard's "Altman's *3 Women*: Sanctuary in the Dream World" from the Winter 1980 issue of *Literature Film Quarterly*; Judith Gustafson's "The Whore with the Heart of Gold: A Second Look at *Klute* and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*" [sic] from the spring 1981 issue of *Cineaste*; Pamela Demory's "'It's about Seeing . . .': Representations of the Female Body in Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* and Raymond Carver Stories" from the January 1999 issue of *Pacific Coast Philology*; Ruth Perlmutter's "Memories, Dreams, Screens" from issue 1 of the 2005 volume of *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*; and, Michael T. Schuyler's "'Traffic was a Bitch': Gender, Race and Spectatorship in Robert Altman's *The Player*" from the Summer 2005 issue of *Journal of Narrative Theory*; and, Richard Combs' "Death and the Maidens" from the February 2007 issue of *Sight and Sound*, published by the British Film Institute. Each of these sources will be discussed in greater detail following a review of more generalized studies of Altman's work.

Most Recent Critical Works

In the years since Altman's death in November 2006, several critical texts, both monographs and essay collections, have been published that examine the director's films from various perspectives. While several of these works do include some discussion of the female characters in his films, none of the works examines the women in depth or through the lens of contemporary feminist thought. Two of these most recent works, Gayle Sherwood Magee's monograph *Robert Altman Soundtracks: Film, Music and Sound from M*A*S*H to A Prairie Home Companion* and Morris B. Holbrook's collection of essays titled *Music, Movies, Meanings, and Markets: cinemajazzamataz*, focus exclusively on the music and sound in Altman's films. Both texts have limited use in this study, particularly Holbrook's collection since it includes only one essay analyzing Altman's use of diegetic jazz music in *Kansas City* (1996). Similarly, Peter Parshall's *Altman and After: Multiple Narratives in Film* and Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema* each includes a single chapter discussing the narrative structure of Altman's *Nashville*. With a focus on the structure and narration rather than on character analysis, these two texts also will be of limited use, particularly since they include little to no analysis of the women in Altman's films, and they focus on a single film. Another recent contribution to the study of Altman's films, Wes D. Gehring's *Genre-Busting Dark Comedies of the 1970s: Twelve American Films*, includes a chapter on Altman's *M*A*S*H*; however, with its narrow focus on genre conventions of dark comedies, it provides little—if anything at all—in the way of new critical analysis of the women characters in *M*A*S*H* or any other of Altman's films.

Robert Niemi's monograph, *The Cinema of Robert Altman: Hollywood Maverick*, concedes that it is a "daunting, even scary undertaking" to find anything new to contribute to the discussion of Altman's films. However, Niemi argues that scholars and critics have largely ignored one important aspect of the director's work: the ways in which Altman's films provide social commentary and criticism of American culture.

While I agree with Niemi's central argument that Altman's "motivating passion was to comment on the state of modern American society" (ix), I disagree with his claim that critics have ignored this aspect of the director's work, especially since Altman himself addresses his intentions when making movies in countless published interviews throughout his film career.² However, his text is still useful in this study—albeit if only to provide a point of contention for discussing the women characters in Altman's movies. Niemi's text includes seven chapters, with only the first chapter—"Three Dream Films: Exploration of Female Identity"—devoted to the discussion of the women in Altman's films; and, as the chapter's title suggests, the author considers only three early films: *That Cold Day in the Park* (1969), *Images* (1972), and *3 Women* (1977). Niemi's limited discussion of women in Altman's films is not remarkable; most critical works examining Altman's films include only cursory discussion of these characters. Further, Niemi seems to approach the discussion of women in these three films with a healthy dose of misogyny himself, noting that the three films focus on women's "sexual, psychological, and emotional problems" (12). Is he truly suggesting that female sexuality should be considered the equivalent of psychological or emotional problems? This chapter in

² This is discussed in Chapter Three in greater detail; Altman said on many occasions he considered his films to be essays and hoped to get his audience to "Stop looking at everything the same way," and see things from a new perspective.

Niemi's text, which was just published in 2016, further proves the need for more in-depth and enlightened studies of the women characters in Altman's films.

Frank Caso's monograph, *Robert Altman: In the American Grain*, argues that Altman "was purely and simply an artist" (7) and examines the director's films by attempting to classify them chronologically and thematically. Like many other critics attempting a comprehensive study of Altman's films, Caso includes some surface-level analysis and discussion of the women characters, with one brief chapter, "Strange Interlude," devoted exclusively to the discussion of *3 Women*. In most instances, Caso examines Altman's movies from an aesthetic perspective, which is interesting but has limited value in terms of furthering the discussion of women in Altman's films. However, the text does include a chapter, "Crime, Punishment and Vaginas," with some discussion of *Dr. T & the Women*, a film that is seldom examined in scholarly texts. Unfortunately, Caso's discussion of *Dr. T & the Women* is limited primarily to summary rather than critical analysis.

Like most collections of critical essays on Altman's films, *A Companion to Robert Altman*, edited by Adrian Danks, begins with an extended discussion and analysis of Altman's work in industrial filmmaking and episodic television; however, Danks insists the coverage of this period in Altman's career is more thorough and comprehensive in his collection than it has been in those previously published by other authors. Danks divides the collection of essays in this text into five sections—"Zoom in: Becoming Altman," "'I've got poetry in me': Seeing and Hearing Altman," "Placing Altman: Space, History and Genre," "Being Altman: Character, Performance and Situation," and "Zoom Out: After Altman"—which he arranges chronologically

according to time periods determined by the release date for the films he is discussing in each section. Essay authors include many notable Altman film scholars, including Virginia Wright Wexman, Robert T. Self, Rick Armstrong, David Sterritt, and Robert Kolker. Although many of the essays include extensive film summaries, they also include critical scholarship. Several essays in this collection include some discussion of the women in Altman's films, including: "3Women: Floating Above the Awful Abyss," by Joe McElhaney, "'One is both the same': Fantasy and Female Psychosis in *Images* and *That Cold Day in the Park*" by David Melville, "The End of the Hollywood Hero: *Dr. T & the Women* and Altman's Multi-Protagonist Narratives," by Maria del Mar Azcona. Like most other edited collections of critical essays on Altman's films, this collection provides interesting and relevant background information for this study; however, it provides limited examination and analysis of the women characters in Altman's films. McElhaney's essay on *3 Women* focuses on the visual landscape created in the film and metaphor created by the painting at the bottom of the swimming pool. The essay's title is borrowed from a line by the "Lecturer" in *Brewster McCloud* and does not allude to any scene in *3 Women*. Melville's essay on *Images* and *That Cold Day in the Park* provides a textual analysis of the film, but offers little in the way of character analysis. Given that Altman's films emphasize characters over plot and narrative structure, these two essays have limited use in a study of women characters.

General Film Studies Sources

To illustrate the artistic and cultural significance attributed to Altman's films by most scholars, it should be noted that most every text used in film studies classes includes a discussion of Altman, his technique, and one or more of the director's films. These texts

attempt to situate Altman and his work within the context of American cinema studies and examine the director's contributions to American filmmaking. In general, then, these texts focus on historical (i.e. cinematic history) aspects of the director's work as well as several fundamental concepts related to film studies: Altman's artistic technique, film genre conventions and corruptions, the idea of authorship and collaboration, and the director's frequent use of ensemble casts. Beyond the discussion of the basics of film construction and artistic technique, these texts also highlight to the innovative technical aspects of Altman's films, such as his use of multi-layered soundtracks and his preference for filming with a wandering lens, as well as the director's distinct and honest depiction of the "American" cultural landscape in the post-Viet Nam era. And while film studies texts can only provide an overview of any given director, concept, technique, or film, these works do provide insight into the relevance of a particular film or director and the context from which the director's work emerges; therefore, these texts provide a good starting point for examining the available scholarship on Altman and his films. Moreover, these texts establish the relevancy the director's work historically and the relevancy of contemporary critical scholarship examining Altman's films.

In the film studies text, *A History of Film*, Virginia Wright Wexman situates Altman's work in the film movement known as American New Wave Cinema, or the American Renaissance. According to Wexman, the films of Altman and other New Wave directors, such as Arthur Penn, Sam Peckinpah, Martin Scorsese, John Cassavetes, and Francis Ford Coppola, are concerned primarily with "critically examining aspects of American culture" (291). As Wexman notes, Altman was the most prolific of the American New Wave directors at the time of his death in 2006. According to Wexman,

“Altman’s style is best described as fragmented. He has claimed that he is interested in ‘splitting areas of reality—in other words, dealing with emotional responses rather than intellectual responses’” (294). Further, the director’s signature use of wide-angle lenses, overlapping dialogue, and “found” musical scores all contribute to the fragmented style of an Altman film. Wexman mentions Altman’s *Nashville*, noting some critics consider it the “director’s crowning achievement” and that Altman himself referred to the film as his “metaphor for America” (294). Wexman also attempts to classify Altman’s films into groups, noting of his early movies that “many productions . . . dissect the traditional American movie genres” while others are “more mysterious and dreamlike, explor[ing] the interior lives of women” (293). However, Wexman does little more than name most of the director’s films as she attempts to situate the director’s work in American culture and cinematic history.

In *A History of Narrative Film*, David A. Cook claims Altman was “perhaps the most important filmmaker working within the American commercial system during the 1970s—as his own producer with Lion’s Gate Films, from 1971 to 1981” (864). Although Cook includes general discussion of most of Altman’s major films, his primary concern is to situate them within the social context of the period in which they appear; he does not explore any of the films or their characters in depth. In considering Altman’s importance as a filmmaker, Cook notes *Brewster McCloud* (1970) “is a deliberate venture into social satire and Altman’s personal favorite among his films” (864). Cook cites critic Andrew Sarris’s assessment of the film as “the first American film to apply an appropriate tone and style to the absurdist follies of our times” (864).

Cook also discusses Altman's *M*A*S*H* (1970), *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), *Images* (1972), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Thieves Like Us* (1974), *3 Women* (1977), *Nashville* (1975), *California Split* (1974), and *Buffalo Bill & the Indians* (1976) and situates these films squarely in the social context of the late 1960s and 1970s, arguing these films provide critical commentary on the narcissism, decadence, violence, and "massive inequalities of our society" (866). While Cook does provide some discussion of Altman's technique, his focus is primarily on the dialogue created between Altman's films and his audience. "In the 1970s, Altman saw us with our raw nerves exposed at a time in American history when the conflicting demands of community and individual freedom were never more extreme, and he became an epic poet of that conflict" (868).

Cook notes the replacement of censorship with a ratings system "revolutionized" the content and form of American cinema in the early 1970s, and argues that while this "liberalization" of cinema opened mainstream cinema to exploitation, it also enabled Altman to create his best films during this period (848). According to Cook, "Altman's 1980s films seemed to have lost touch with the mass audience . . . [and] after a brief detour into theater, Altman re-emerged in the 1990s with his aesthetic and moral vision fully intact to produce *The Player* and *Short Cuts*, two of his most challenging essays in social criticism . . ." (867-868).

James Monaco's *How to Read a Film* examines the technical aspects of filmmaking and considers the effects created by these techniques. Interestingly, Monaco does use many Altman films as examples to illustrate the claims he makes about technique. Altman films and techniques discussed in Monaco's book include *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976) and the use of camera lenses (92); *Nashville* (1975) and the use of

eight-track sound (140); and, *The Player* (1992) and the use of tracking shots (237).

Throughout the text, Monaco also discusses in some detail genre conventions as well as filmic and “Hollywood” conventions, noting Altman’s penchant for subverting and satirizing the conventions of all three. Perhaps the most significant contribution Monaco makes to the discussion of Altman’s work is in considering its effect on television programming, noting that Altman’s “sense of humor and . . . treatment of relevant political issues” could be found in several highly successful series, including the long-running *Hill Street Blues* (547).

In *American Film: A History*, Jon Lewis includes a brief (four pages) sub-chapter on Robert Altman in his chapter “A Hollywood Renaissance [1968-1980]”. Lewis’s discussion of Altman and his films focuses primarily on the commercial success of, or lack thereof, of Altman’s films and on genre conventions, or corruption thereof, in Altman’s major films during this twelve-year period. Lewis gives brief attention to Altman’s filmmaking technique, touching on the same technical aspects of Altman’s films that most other film scholars and critics point out: the use of multi-layered sound tracks, wide-angle lenses, and tracking shots, but includes almost no discussion the social commentary, creation of dialogue by and between actors in his films, or the characters found in the director’s films.

Gerald Mast, in *A Short History of the Movies*, declares Altman one of the “new American *auteurs*” (523) making movies in the period he labels the “Hollywood Renaissance: 1964-76” (516). Mast claims that filmmakers of this period no longer made all films to appeal to all audiences; instead, films were targeted to particular audiences. Mast considers most of Altman’s films of this period to be “art films,” arguing “the

values of these new American ‘art films’ reflected the sexual and social values of American film audiences in the period” (518). The text includes discussion of *Thieves Like Us* (1974), a film Mast likens to Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) in style and thematic elements (518). The text also includes discussion of Altman’s “experiential” western *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, with Mast focusing primarily on the artistic elements of the film (519).

In a separate sub-chapter on Robert Altman, Mast includes brief discussion of many of the director’s films beginning with *Brewster McCloud* (1970) and ending with *Gosford Park* (2001). In a departure from the approach taken by many other film studies texts, this text considers the narrative structure of Altman’s films, and Mast claims the director’s films “come in two narrative sizes” (526). Mast defines these two sizes as being small or large, with the small narrative size providing a close study of people “who lead bizarre lives or are possessed by their dreams” (526). Accordingly, the large narrative size requires a “much larger canvas” to create a “broad study of a particular American institution, built from a great number of interwoven characters, adding up to a cross-sectional view of American life” (526). According to Mast, Altman’s work demonstrates two consistent strengths: “the compelling spontaneous moments of human interaction” and “his perceptive scrutiny of American social institutions” (527).

David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s *Film Art*, one of the most widely used texts in introductory cinema studies courses, includes discussion of Altman’s *Nashville* (1975) as an experimental example of narrative film structure that replaces a single protagonist with an ensemble of characters and story lines. According to Bordwell and Thompson, this narrative strategy shifts the emphasis of a film from a specific character

to one that focuses on society in general (109). The text also includes brief discussion of the director's use of improvisation, which allows actors to contribute to the creation of a film's meaning (170). Beyond linking the director to his experimental style of narration and improvisation, the text also situates Altman's work as a whole within the "New Hollywood" of independent filmmakers of the 1970s. Likewise, Bordwell's *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* includes a limited discussion of Altman's work, but it examines only the director's filmic technique and subversion of genre conventions. Neither work includes any real discussion of the director's women characters or audience response to these characters.

Period-Specific Film Studies Sources

Peter Lev's *American Films of the 70s: Conflicting Visions* provides a useful, but somewhat limited, historical and contextual examination of forty films from the 1970s, arguing that these films create a dialogue between one another and represent conflicting visions of the nature and prospects for American culture (xi). Lev claims his work is "loosely inspired" by Mikhail Bakhtin's theories, especially the concepts of dialogism and polyphony; however, he does not cite Bakhtin's work in any of the individual film analyses included in his text. As for Lev's discussion of Altman's films, *M*A*S*H* is mentioned in the prologue, but only in passing. Later in the text, both *Nashville* and *M*A*S*H* are discussed briefly in the chapter titled "The End of the Sixties." In this chapter, *M*A*S*H* and the leading male characters are mentioned only in passing. While the discussion of *Nashville* focuses on the "uniqueness" of the film, it does mention each of the film's major female characters, linking each one to negative scenes and or overall negative depictions. According to Lev, Shelley Duvall's L. A. Joan is "too busy chasing

men,” while a “hapless” Sueleen performs a “humiliating striptease” and gospel singer “Linnea sleeps with Tom” (63). Lev’s superficial consideration of the women characters in *Nashville* ignores the obvious: the women in the film are acting on behalf of their own interests rather than in the interest of one of the male characters. In spite of the limited critical analysis of Altman’s films in this work, the text does provide valuable background information on films of the 1970s, which helps contextualize Altman’s work within both the film industry and American culture.

Robin Wood’s revised and expanded edition of *Hollywood from Vietnam to Regan . . . and Beyond* includes a collection of critical essays, some examining individual films and directors from the 1970s and 1980s, others examining trends in filmmaking and the film industry during this same period. Also included in the study is one 1960s film, though that particular essay is not relevant to this study. Many film scholars consider Wood’s original 1986 text a classic film studies text, and the revised and expanded edition includes the original essays. Further, Wood’s 2003 edition includes a new prologue addressing contemporary concerns that have become more relevant to the film industry in the twenty-first century, such as technology and science, global warming, and technological advances as well as several others. While Wood’s original text covered the period between 1970 and 1984, the revised edition covers film released through the 1990s and early 2000s. Much of the material in these critical essays is useful only for backgrounding Altman’s work during the period. However, Wood does include one essay, “Smart-Ass and Cutie-Pie: Notes Toward the Evaluation of Altman,” that is relevant to this study to some degree; however, the essay was originally written in 1975, so it is not a comprehensive examination of Altman’s movies. Another chapter in the text,

“Images and Women,” is also relevant to this study as it provides some insight into feminist film criticism in the 1970s and 1980s, although this insight and criticism is very limited in scope and includes no discussion of Altman’s movies.

While Paul Monaco’s *The Sixties*, volume eight in *History of the American Cinema* series funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and edited by Charles Harpole, includes only a cursory mention of Altman as an innovative director, succeeding volumes in the history series include much deeper analysis of the director’s individual films and overall contributions to American cinema. Given that David A. Cook’s *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam* chronicles the history of American film during the decade considered to include Altman’s finest work, it is not surprising that Cook begins his extensive discussion of the director and his films on the very first page of the preface to this text. In the preface, Cook declares Altman’s *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* opens the decade in cinema by offering an “uncompromising [critique] of frontier capitalism and, by extension, the American economic system at large” (xv). Most scholars and critics consider Altman’s 1970s films to be examples of cinematic excellence both artistically and technically. However, much of the critical response to *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* in particular and Altman’s 1970s films in general has focused on genre studies—particularly the director’s attempt to satirize and debunk the cultural myths embedded in genre films—rather than examining the technical aspects or artistic features of Altman’s films. Cook does not ignore the genre-studies approach to Altman’s work; however, he directs his focus on the cultural context from which the films emerge, connecting this context to the genre conventions, and thus illuminates the social critique inherent in the director’s work from this period.

In addition to the examination of genre conventions and social critique in Altman's 1970s films, Cook also devotes considerable space to the discussion of the technological innovations the director uses and the manner in which he uses this technology in his films to draw audience attention to particular elements – and perhaps highlight their significance. According to Cook, Altman “used the zoom more systematically during the 1970s than any filmmaker before or since . . . virtually all of his 1970s work is composed of long takes structured by panning and zooming” (362). Altman's use of “pushing” and “flashing” film to create certain visual effects is also discussed; and, of course, discussion of Altman's use of layered sound tracks is included here as well. When relevant, Altman's use of technology and the resulting effect on the meaning the technology creates will be explored in greater depth as individual films are examined later in this study.

In the introduction to *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood under the Electric Rainbow*, Stephen Prince asserts that Altman, as well as several other 1970s auteurs, “had trouble sustaining [his] career” in the 1980s (xix). According to Prince, advancements in special effects technology led to increased popularity of fantasy and science fiction films; and, “traditional American film genres enjoyed great vitality and popularity during the [1980s]” (xix). It is no wonder then, given Altman's preference for realism and subverting conventional film genres in an attempt to debunk their embedded mythology, the director's work from the 1980s has received much less attention and acclaim—both commercially and critically. It is this aspect of Altman's 1980s films that Prince explores in his text, leading him to label Altman an “embattled auteur” (200).

While the “embattled auteur” theme permeates Prince’s discussion of Altman’s 1980s films, he does include brief discussion of the filmmaker’s major feature films of the 1980s in this text. Two of Altman’s 1980s films discussed in this text are important films in this study, *Fool for Love* (1985) and *Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982); however, the discussion in this text does not include in-depth discussion of the women characters in these two films. Prince also returns to one of the most common themes found in Altman studies: subversion of genre conventions. With regard to genre-based film studies, Prince briefly examines Altman’s *Popeye* (1980) as a subversion of Hollywood musicals; however, as previously noted, discussion of Altman and his 1980s films is extremely limited in this text as the author continually returns to the idea of Altman as struggling to find a niche in the 1980s film industry. It should be noted here that volume eleven in this series, which would examine and contextualize films from 1990-1999, has not yet been published.

Geoff King’s *New Hollywood Cinema, an Introduction* includes some discussion of Altman and several of his films, but this discussion generally juxtaposes Altman’s films against other films or the overall work of other directors. King acknowledges that it is not possible to provide a clear definition of “New Hollywood cinema” since film scholars and industry professionals do not agree on the meaning of this concept (1-3). He also refers to the “New Hollywood” as the Renaissance in Hollywood moviemaking, and claims directors such as Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese define and represent this period as much as any single film defines and represents it (89). King also identifies two types of “New Hollywood” film directors—“auteurs” and “brats” (85)—and attempts to distinguish between the two by linking the “brats” to prestigious film

programs at major universities. Although King never clearly indicates which directors he considers auteurs or brats, he does claim that Altman's films "offer a strong case for auteurist interpretation in terms of themes (genre deconstruction and satirical portraits of a range of institutions), style (use of zooms, multiple and overlapping dialogue, loose narrative structure), and the deployment of something close to a repertory company of performers and other collaborators" (89).

Theme-Based Film Studies Sources

Altman's work as a feature filmmaker has always drawn critical and scholarly attention, and several texts have been published that include chapters on Altman, discussing one or more of the director's films. While these works include little to no examination or analysis of the women characters in the director's films, they are being included here to provide evidence of the scope of this research and the relevance of Altman's work in American popular culture. The *Rolling Stone Film Reader: The Best Film Writing from Rolling Stone Magazine* provides a collection of reprinted articles from the 1960s through the 1990s, of which editor Peter Travers says represent "[not] simply a collection of lively interviews, profiles, on-the-set pieces and reviews . . . [but they are] a legacy of rebel film" (Travers, "Introduction," 1). The collection includes "Making Robert Altman's *Nashville*," an on-the-set piece written by Chris Hodenfield and published originally in the July 17, 1975 issue of *Rolling Stone*. In this article, Hodenfield includes interviews with Altman and several key actors from the film.

Because these interviews were conducted during actual filming and editing of *Nashville*, this piece provides greater insight into the film and Altman's work at the time. While Hodenfield's article includes little—if any—discussion about the women in

Altman's films, it does include some discussion of the director's narrative style, which is a common theme in Altman scholarship. In explaining his approach to filmic "storytelling," Altman tells Hodenfield that filmmaking has much in common with painting and music, but that filmmakers do not treat the process as such. Of the process, Altman says: "I don't think we've found a format for movies yet. I think we're still imitating literature and theater. I don't think film should be limited to photographing people talking. . . . I think if you just establish a *mood* with a film, it might have more impact than anything we've done, just a *mood*" (Altman, qtd. in Hodenfield, 180). Director Alan Rudolph, who worked as Altman's assistant director on *Nashville* and is considered by many to be Altman's protégé, explained the director's approach more succinctly and more clearly, explaining the significance of Altman's work. Rudolph tells Hodenfield, "[Altman] shoots film like he sees life, tucked away in the corner, seeing everything, picking up all the intimate details" (Rudolph, qtd. in Hodenfield, 184).

Gene Phillips' *Creatures of Darkness: Raymond Chandler, Detective Fiction, and Film Noir* is a somewhat scholarly text that examines various film adaptations of Raymond Chandler's crime fiction novels through the lens of genre studies. The chapter on Altman's *The Long Goodbye* is notable for its discussion of the film's cinematography and the manner in which the film was processed after shooting; however, both of these technical aspects of the film are frequently examined in scholarly and critical articles discussing Altman's work. Beyond this discussion of technique, Phillips includes discussion of the adaptation of Chandler's novel for this film, noting changes Altman and Leigh Brackett, the screenwriter, made to the original text. Like so many other critical

and scholarly texts on Altman's films, however, this chapter includes no real discussion of Altman's women characters.

Like Gene Phillips' *Creatures of Darkness*, James Phillips' *Cinematic Thinking: Critical Approaches to the New Cinema*, includes a collection of scholarly essays focused on a single theme, in this instance New Cinema. Phillips argues the "philosophical interest of the New Cinema is its simultaneously material and political interest" (3), and includes essays that deal with a particular director and the artistic manner in which he approaches these concerns. The essay on Altman included in this collection is Michael J. Shapiro's "The West as Counter-memory," which examines Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971) and *Buffalo Bill and the Indians: Or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976). In this critical essay, Shapiro examines the narrative structure of these films and Altman's attempt to "dislodge the imagistic and narrative clichés with which the West has been produced in classic westerns" (54). Like many of the genre studies essays on Altman's work, Shapiro's essay focuses on Altman's films as counter-discourse in both the film industry and American popular culture. Discussion of Constance Miller and other women in these two films is minimal and generally predictable, noting that she is the typical whore-with-a-heart-of-gold, and providing nothing new about the women to aid in understanding the dialogic relationship that exists between Altman, his women characters, and his audience.

"New Cinema Films" Studies Sources

Several texts that provide an exploration of 1970s films and or New Cinema films include noteworthy chapters on Altman. Ryan Gilbey's *It Don't Worry Me: The Revolutionary American Films of the Seventies*, which takes its title from Altman's

Nashville, contextualizes 1970s cinema against the backdrop of the Hollywood studio system that began its decline in the mid-1960s and considers how the movies of that period have influenced the evolution of cinema. One of Gilbey's central arguments about films is that "movies of the past are not movies of the past at all . . . their power remains undimmed [by time]" (10). Consequently, the filmmakers Gilbey includes in this text represent a particular model of director: one who makes films that have "transformed movies and their audiences in ways that continue to impact cinema today" (11). Like many critical works on Altman's films, Gilbey's text is primarily concerned with the director's artistic use of camera angles, lighting, and sound, and the director's belief that "the material is created in the hands of the actors, and the movie is completed in the eye of the viewer" (123). His approach is holistic in the examination and discussion of Altman's work, which Gilbey considers significant in the evolution of cinema. According to Gilbey:

[N]o one has challenged and revolutionized the way in which we watch and listen to movies like Altman. Nor has anyone fought so hard to liberate cinema from the influence of literature, theatre, and television. In his hands, [cinema] has become an autonomous art form, and audiences have undergone a corresponding emancipation. He doesn't ever forget that cinema itself was the original special effect. (121-122)

Gilbey clearly draws this conclusion about Altman's attempts to "liberate cinema from the influence of literature" from the director's own words. Altman frequently spoke about the differences between what he perceived to be a static literary text in which the words on the page are the same for every reader and a fluid film text in which audiences might

each see or hear something, depending on how attentively they watched. Gilbey also includes discussion of thematic elements and the ways in which Altman uses technology to create and or enhance themes in his films, but little or no discussion of characters is included in this text.

One of the primary themes Gilbey identifies in Altman's work is that of loneliness, a theme that is explored extensively in Robert Kolker's earlier critical work *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman*. Kolker includes discussion of Altman's feature films released through *Cookie's Fortune* (1999), and while he focuses primarily on Altman's most notable 1970s films, he does include some discussion of other works. Kolker examines Altman's use of camera angles and lighting, as well as other filmic conventions, to create and convey the sense of loneliness he believes is present in the director's work. Kolker examines the director's technique from both artistic—read: poetic—and rhetorical perspectives. According to Kolker, Altman's work is significant because the director—in and through his films—“launches an investigation of the ways one observes filmic constructions and the ways one reads the narratives to which these constructions give form” (337). Kolker's extensive and in-depth exploration of some films—*That Cold Day in the Park*, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, *Nashville*, and others—provides valuable insight into the women characters in those films; however, his examination of these women characters situates them as lonely outsiders, which represents a different critical approach than this study undertakes.

Critical Collections on Altman's Work

In addition to multiple film studies texts and the general and focused-study reference works on film and the film industry that include critical discussion of Altman

and his films, several books have been published that focus exclusively on Altman and one or more of his films. These works include Rick Armstrong's 2011 edited collection of essays, *Robert Altman: Critical Essays*, Robert Self's 2007 monograph *Robert Altman's McCabe & Mrs. Miller: Reframing the American West*, and Jan Stuart's 2000 nonfiction text *The Nashville Chronicles: The Making of Robert Altman's Masterpiece*. While each of these works provides insight for evaluating particular Altman films, none provides any in-depth analysis or insight into the women characters in any of the Altman films. Similarly, most scholarly and critical essays and articles on Altman and or his films include little or no discussion of the women characters, and since their relevance to this study is limited in that respect, they will not be included in this review. However, one article is worth mentioning here, although it does not include substantial discussion of Altman's women characters, as it examines Altman's work in context and considers the relevance and significance of his films from a social and economic perspective in terms of both American culture and the film industry. "From the New Wave to the New Hollywood: The Life Cycles of Important Movie Directors from Godard and Truffaut to Spielberg and Eastwood" by David W. Galenson and Joshua Kotin appears in the January 2010 edition of *Historical Methods*, published by the National Bureau of Economic Research at the University of Chicago. The study supports the claim that Altman studies are still relevant in the twenty-first century. Authors Galenson and Kotin identify the ten most influential filmmakers of the late twentieth century and examine the influence of their films and careers on the film industry and American culture, the primary audience and consumers of the film industry. They include Robert Altman on their list, noting that

he was likely the greatest American movie director until the time of his death in November 2006.

Galenson and Kotin claim, “the most influential filmmakers in the history of cinema have approached their work in two different ways . . . conceptual and experimental” (29). They note that in categorizing the directors included in their study, they “have drawn on a range of evidence, including the judgments of scholars and critics, and statements by the directors themselves, as well as [their] own understanding of each director’s work” (31). According to the authors, conceptual directors make movies based on ideas, while experimental directors make movies based on experiences. Conceptual directors in this study include Jean-Luc Godard, Stanley Kubrick, Francis Ford Coppola, Francois Truffaut, and Steven Spielberg. Experimental filmmakers included in this study are Woody Allen, Clint Eastwood, John Cassavetes, Martin Scorsese, and Robert Altman.³

The authors connect conceptual filmmakers with ideologies that range from intertextual relationships among works or art (i.e. film and literature) to the concern with what is moral, noting these two represent the extremes at either end of the spectrum. Conceptual filmmakers often rely on motifs and artistic, if abstract, style to convey their meaning to audiences, and they use the technical aspects of filmmaking—such as jump-cuts, deep focus shots, and “unusual camera angles”—to create distance between the film

³ The authors explain the process by which they selected the ten most influential filmmakers as follows: “The list of ten filmmakers used in this study is derived from two sources. First, we took all the directors born after 1920 included in *MovieMaker* magazine’s list of the ‘25 Most Influential Directors of All Time’ (Wood, 2002). A panel of 48 expert judges selected by the magazine composed this list. This gave us eight names. The chief film critic for the *New York Times*, A. O. Scott, (2006), gave us an additional two names. In his summary of the best films of 2006, he wrote, ‘Clint Eastwood, the greatest living American filmmaker (as of November), just gets better and better.’ His qualification ‘as of November’ refers to the director Robert Altman, who died in November of that year. Accordingly, we added both Eastwood and Altman to the list from *MovieMaker*.” Pg. 31

and audiences and to “betray the conventions of cinematic realism” (30). The authors claim that films by these directors are “entertaining and moving” and use “cinematic techniques such as special effects [to] encourage audiences [to] forget they are watching a movie” because they are “so caught up in the action” (30). According to the study’s authors, audiences “support the characters in these films not because of who they are but because of what they symbolize” (30). Further, they note that the films by these conceptual directors often are box office hits, bringing in huge receipts.

The second, and oppositional, approach used by the most influential filmmakers is experimental, a style of filmmaking that is motivated by personal experiences in the world rather than by ideas. In fact, these directors “resist encapsulating [their own] experiences in ideological statements, abstract concepts, or allegories. One could say they try to impress the world onto their films, rather than their films onto the world” (30). As noted by the authors, experimental filmmakers rely on techniques that emphasize reality in sound, lighting, camera angles, plot, and character development, and “tend to avoid explicit symbolism” (30). Further, the authors claim the goal of experimental filmmakers is to represent life and characters in such a way that film audiences can “identify with characters who, unlike the characters of their conceptual counterparts, usually seem genuine, complex, and ambiguous – just like real people” (30). As noted by the authors, “Altman’s [filmmaking] techniques were all intended to enhance his films’ realism” – the use of overlapping dialogue and multi-track sound tracks, long takes and continuous camera movement, and the avoidance of close-ups “were equally aimed not at clarity but at authenticity” (32). It is through this sense of realism that Altman strives to create that

we can better understand the significance of his relationship with his women characters and his American audience, which is the focus of this study.

The most significant scholarly work to consider Altman's women from a feminist perspective is the previously mentioned Helene Keyssar's monograph, *Robert Altman's America*. Published in 1991, it is incomplete and somewhat out of date, excluding almost one-third of the director's films. Keyssar's text examines the director's twenty-four feature films released between 1968 and 1990 and divides them thematically into five chapters: "The Altman Signature: A World in Motion," "Power and Morality: The Fraternal Films," "*Nashville*: New Roots in the Nation," "The Unconquered: The Feminization of Altman's Films," and "Democratic Vistas: Spectacles, Screens, and Monitors." In the opening chapter, "The Altman Signature: A World in Motion," Keyssar identifies elements that bind the director's films to one another and to the director's audience. She argues that Altman is not an American romantic; rather, his films "confront the absurdity and the lie in the roots of the nation" (47). However, she notes that while Altman's films "reveal the illusions and corruptions" in American culture, they are neither cynical nor stupid (47) in their attitude toward the communities that create this culture. Further, Keyssar notes, "Altman's characters persistently reevaluate their relationships to each other and make us work at our relationships to them . . . our attachment or detachment to any given character is rarely static" (38). Keyssar's observation about the manner in which Altman's characters continually reevaluate their relationships to one another is significant: this persistent reevaluation illustrates the heart of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism.

Although Keyssar discusses most technical and artistic elements of Altman's films, it is his characters and their relationship to American culture – philosophically and realistically – that concerns her most in this text, particularly his women. Keyssar claims, "Cast in a dramatized society, Altman's characters theatricalize the mundane and idolize the theatrical. Yet, in the company of women, Altman's camera discovers remnants of American rituals sustained in secret responsibility" (47). In the chapter Keyssar devotes exclusively to Altman's "women films," she examines the technical and artistic methods Altman uses and considers the effect of these methods in constructing meaning. She draws on the works of philosophers such as Roland Barthes and Carl Jung as well as film theorists such as Peter Wollen and Sergei Eisenstein as she deconstructs these films and the women Altman creates in these filmic worlds. While Keyssar's analysis of these films and the women in them is quite thorough, she includes minimal discussion about the relationship between these women and their audience. In this text, Keyssar claims:

Altman's women are fully of the worlds in which they are framed. They penetrate these worlds from its borders, attracting the camera by the awkwardness not the grace of their presence. Rather than thwarting community, they provide the catalyst and only resources for comradeship and society. It is the loneliness of women that is increasingly at the heart of Altman's films; in juxtaposition, we see and hear the solitude of men not as heroic, but as dismal, and we see and hear the hollow fraternal gatherings. (47)

Again, Keyssar is describing a dialogic process, and suggesting that, in Altman's films, it is the women characters who are the catalysts for these dialogues, which define and change our world. If we are to accept the existence of this dialogic relationship between

Altman's women and the worlds from which they emerge and represent, then we must acknowledge that further study of this relationship is warranted.

In the text *Robert Altman's Subliminal Reality*, Robert Self also includes a chapter dedicated to Altman's "women's films" (149), but changes the label used earlier by Helene Keyssar from "women films" to "women's films." The films examined by Self in "Resisting Women: Madness, Dreams, and Art" are *Images*, *3 Women*, *Come Back to the 5 & Dime*, *Jimmy Dean*, *Jimmy Dean*, and *Cookie's Fortune*. Self's analysis and discussion of these films is not as detailed as that of Keyssar, and this chapter seems to be primarily a response to earlier feminist criticism of Altman's work as well as a defense of the director and his films. Self claims that like feminist criticism and the art cinema, Altman's films examine "the effects of a system that identifies women as the object of male desire, dependent on male awareness, and the position within the symbolic order that such a system affords the female subjects" (148-149). Further, rather than seeing Altman's women as being active participants in control of their worlds, Self reads them as being even "more distressed" than Altman's men, who he believes are fragmented and troubled by doubt and failure (149). According to Self, "Altman's women's films make quite explicit the conflict between a weak inner self and an outer persona dominated by machismo, the phallus, the white father, the law" (149). Self claims the films selected for inclusion in his text are distinguishable among Altman's work due to:

the large roles set for women characters by the external narratives of the films themselves and, on the other hand, the nature of the narrative voices given to these female characters within each diegesis. The narratives voiced in *Images*, *3*

Women, Jimmy Dean, and Cookie's Fortune describe a subjectivity that reflects a troubling of language sexuality, and economics . . . (151)

His analysis of these films focuses on the narrative structure and voice and the theme of identity fragmentation – the inner world versus the outer world. Moreover, Self fails to acknowledge that the women characters he is writing about are self-aware and agents acting on their own behalf. While his is certainly a valid approach to use in analyzing these works, it does not take into account the concepts of dialogism or polyphony nor does it consider the agency with which Altman's women characters act – all of which are central to this study. Further, the value of Self's work is limited by his choice to include in-depth discussion of only a few particular films. To truly understand and contextualize Altman's women, one must consider more than just a few examples selected from a particular type of film; one must consider Altman's body of work as a whole.

Peer-Reviewed Journal Sources

As previously mentioned, there are only a few journal articles that examine the women characters in Altman's films, but several of these articles have limited use in this study. Marsha Kinder's "The Art of Dreaming in *Three Women* [sic] and *Providence*: Structures of the Self" is primarily a psychological criticism of *3 Women* and another, non-Altman film. Kinder argues that *3 Women* and *Providence* focus on dreams as a means of preserving self; her argument is essentially a response to the structuralism of Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Foucault and others, who claim the "self" is no longer relevant. Kinder claims *3 Women* "is primarily concerned with new beginnings" (10), although these new beginnings come from death—literally and figuratively—and rebirth. Although Kinder includes extensive analysis of the women characters and the film itself, it is a

psychological analysis rather than a sociological analysis, thereby limiting the article's usefulness in this study. Likewise, Ruth Perlmutter's "Memories, Dreams, Screens" provides some discussion of Pinky, Millie, and Willie from *3 Women*; however, this discussion is also framed as a psychological argument concerned with identity and doubling. Further limiting its usefulness to this study, Perlmutter's article focuses primarily on David Lynch's later film, *Mullholland Drive* (2001) than it does on Altman's *3 Women*.

Krin Gabbard's "Altman's *3 Women*: Sanctuary in the Dream World" is another article of limited use in this study. Although the article does include a detailed analysis of women in this film, the author's primary focus is on the function of dreams in the film and the lives of the characters. Gabbard's critical approach to the film is psychological: her central argument is the three women in the film "regress from adulthood's pressures into a strange trio of roles that parody normal familial relationships" (258). Gabbard examines the relationship between the three central characters, as well as their individual relationships to other characters, focusing on the themes of death and rebirth, which she finds prevalent in the film. The psychological approach to criticism taken by the author and the focus on dreams as a means of escape rather than fulfillment limit the usefulness of this article.

An article more relevant to this study is Michael T. Schuyler's article, "'Traffic Was a Bitch': Gender, Race and Spectatorship in Robert Altman's *The Player*." Schuyler's main argument concerning women in the film is "that Altman includes the subordination, domination, and exclusion of women in *The Player* as a pro-female commentary against the established discourse of patriarchal success in the Classical

Hollywood narrative” (219). Similarly, although not relevant to this study, Altman uses a “prevailing racist rhetoric” to illuminate the problem of racism in Hollywood and American culture (219). According to Schuyler, Altman considers these to be “issues of power” and uses “stargazing [to reinforce] the audience’s consciousness” of these concerns (219).

In framing his argument, Schuyler acknowledges earlier works that have illustrated the connection between American popular culture, the industries that shape and communicate this culture, and the effects these industries have on the construction of individual identity. Schuyler includes detailed analysis of the four female characters who “define Griffin throughout *The Player*”; and who, according to Schuyler, “threaten, endanger, impede our hero’s stability” (219). Further, Schuyler includes detailed analysis of the narrative structure and plot of the film, connecting actions to characters to illustrate his argument about the distribution and wielding of power. Schuyler also includes some discussion of the relationship between the film, the characters, and the audience. According to Schuyler, *The Player* is “a feminist document [that] comments on gender stereotypes as they exist in the workplace and as Hollywood proliferates them” (227).

In the *Sight & Sound* article “Robert Altman: Death and the Maidens,” author Richard Combs claims the images and ideas represented by the Angel of Death in *A Prairie Home Companion* have been present in all of Altman’s films. Combs links the Dangerous Woman – the official name of the Angel of Death character – to the themes of “doubleness . . . and the female principle,” concepts he claims “explain more clearly the drive of Altman’s films than anything to do with his outsider status in Hollywood” (15). Although this article includes only brief discussion of characters in Altman’s films, it is

notable for the manner in which it connects Altman's artistic technique with a female perspective. Combs claims Altman's technique, such as the use of overlapping dialogue and the zoom lens, "is linked to the female presence and is fully developed by the time of *That Cold Day in the Park*" (15).

In her article "The Whore with a Heart of Gold: A Second Look at *Klute* and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*" [sic], Judith Gustafson argues that while Alan Pakula's *Klute* offers a patriarchal view of male-female relationships, Altman's film creates "a genuinely feminist vision" (14). Gustafson provides detailed analysis of scenes and characters from Altman's film to support her argument; and, she asserts that Mrs. Miller's recognition that all women are commodities empower her, providing her with the "power traditionally granted men" (49). This article is particularly relevant to my study for two reasons. First, it provides a feminist perspective and reading of a film—and character—considered an Altman masterpiece. Second, the article provides a feminist perspective from the early 1980s, a period when ideas about feminism and its goals became more divergent, giving way to what has become to some third-wave feminism and to others post-feminism.

Pamela Demory's "'It's about Seeing . . .': Representations of the Female Body in Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* and Raymond Carver Stories" examines Altman's use of nudity in *Short Cuts*. In the article, Demory is essentially responding to Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" as well as various critics who lambasted Altman's film for its use of what they believed to be gratuitous female nudity. She notes that male and female critics generally responded to the nudity in *Short Cuts* differently, with female critics tending to see the nudity as being "produced . . . for the pleasure of

looking at them” (98). Demory, however, argues that “Altman uses nudity in a self-conscious way, [and] the result is not sexist or demeaning, but analytical . . . in a self-conscious way that at first seems to offer a critique of that same objectifying gaze” (98). While Demory concedes her initial response to the nudity in *Short Cuts* was similar to the other female critics, but she believes the controversy warrants more consideration than this simple criticism provides. According to Demory, “Altman also seems conscious of the sexism inherent in the traditional representation of women. . . . [and he] does seem to be exploring this contradiction and thus at least to recognize a feminist point of view” (99).

In the article, Demory provides in-depth analysis of the scenes depicting both male and female nudity, and attempts to reconcile these images and their construction with feminist theory, particularly the ideas about male spectatorship. Ultimately, though, Demory claims Altman falls short of his goal to reveal gender stereotypes and inequalities and instead perpetuates them. According to Demory:

Clearly, Altman wants us, the viewers, to think about how *we* see. He’s deliberately constructed his film so that it forces the viewer to enact the voyeuristic impulse that so many of his characters indulge. But I’d like to suggest that the responsibility cuts both ways: what we see, how we see, is largely determined by the way the images are prepared for us . . . (104)

While Demory’s point is valid to some degree, the director’s gaze *is* the camera, and thus the film we see, she fails to acknowledge the dialogic nature of Altman’s films, which is a major omission given that sound and dialogue are intentionally critical elements in the director’s work. Furthermore, Demory ignores Altman’s use of overlapping dialogue,

which often is at odds with the images on the screen. Demory also notes that Altman addresses the nudity in *Short Cuts* in a *New York Times Book Review* interview, and she claims he disavows responsibility for the images he creates, a position she rejects. “So while Altman self-consciously reveals his awareness of the traditional gender role stereotyping and of the sexism of the male gaze, he also contributes to it” (104).

Documentary Films and Other Non-Print Sources

It seems only fitting that a critical work about feature films should consult non-print sources, such as full-length documentary films and short, non-fiction films and interviews. The most recent among this type of source is Ron Mann’s *Altman* (2014) which provides a ninety-six-minute sampling of the director’s feature films. Since Altman’s career spans portions of six decades and more than thirty feature films, it would be impossible to provide detailed insight in such a short film. However, the film is interesting and engaging, and includes interviews with many of the actors who routinely starred in Altman’s films, each of them attempting to define “Altmanesque.” Notable interviews in the film include Keith Carradine, Sally Kellerman, Lily Tomlin, Julianne Moore, James Caan, Elliott Gould, Lyle Lovett, Robin Williams, and Bruce Willis. Also included are interviews with director Paul Thomas Anderson as well as family members Kathryn Reed Altman, Robert (Bobby) Reed Altman, and Matthew Altman. The film also includes some interview film footage of the director discussing his films, but these film clips are extracted from previously filmed and released interviews. The documentary is visually appealing and provides a good overview with plenty of film clips from the director’s work. However, there is little to no discussion of the controversy surrounding the depiction of women in Altman’s films, even though two of the actors who portrayed

characters often cited as examples of “problematic” depictions—Sally Kellerman and Julianne Moore—are interviewed for the film.

American Film Institute’s *The Directors: Robert Altman* (2001) is a sixty-minute overview of the director’s career directed by Robert J. Emery for the second season of AFI’s documentary series “focusing on some of cinema’s greatest film directors” (*The Directors*). The documentary was filmed and released before the director’s death, so it does include some original interview footage of Altman rather than excerpts from previously broadcast interviews. In this documentary, Altman explains his attachment to each of his films. “Each time I start a film . . . while I’m doing it . . . by the time I finish it, I think ‘This is the greatest thing since *M*A*S*H*! Everybody’s going to love this film – it’s going to win every Academy Award! And they don’t. I’ve decided I’ve deluded myself all these years – maybe I don’t really know this business.” While the film is relatively short, it does provide very insightful interviews with Sally Kellerman, Glenn Close, Shelley Duvall, and Joan Tewkesbury – all women who worked with Altman on multiple projects. Further, Kellerman’s interview provides insight into the infamous shower scene from *M*A*S*H* – but from her perspective, not that of a critic or audience member.

Several other documentary films provide context for Altman’s work: *Easy Riders and Raging Bulls: How the Sex, Drugs, and Rock-n-Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (2003), directed by Kenneth Bowser; *The Z Channel: A Magnificent Obsession* (2004), directed by Xan Cassavetes; *A Decade Under the Influence* (2003), directed by Ted Demme and Richard LaGravenese; *This Film is Not Yet Rated* (2006), directed by Kirby Dick; and *These Amazing Shadows* (2011), directed by Paul Mariano and Kurt Norton.

Each of these films includes some discussion of Altman's work, and most include some interview footage of the director and or excerpts from his films. The only exception to this is *This Film is Not Yet Rated*; however, Kirby Dick's documentary does provide something the other films do not: insight into the Motion Picture Association of America's ratings system and the depiction of women in film.

In addition to these documentary film sources, there are countless interviews with Robert Altman available on YouTube, which can be viewed freely. However, most of the interviews are extracted from longer works or from the "Special Features" sections included on the DVD releases of Altman's films.

Conclusions

One of the most common themes in the analysis of Altman's work by scholars and critics alike is the idea that the filmmaker's body of work offers a realistic yet distinctly Altmanesque representation of American culture. Further, as Helene Keyssar notes, this representation created by Altman invites "all Americans to engage in a conversation" about our collective "past, present, and future" (5). In spite of this invitation to engage in dialogue created by Altman and his films, little scholarship—and thus little dialogue—exists that examines the discursive relationship between Altman, his women characters, and the women who become his audience. Although a fair amount of scholarship on Altman and his films is available, this body of scholarship is limited in scope to particular films and themes, as noted throughout this chapter. Keyssar argues that Altman's films deserve further examination and consideration. "[It is Altman's] attempt to reorder the location of American women and men on film, an attempt that both initiates and requires imagining radical transformations of American culture, that merits

further pursuit” (Keyssar 47). My goal, through this examination of the dialogic construction of women in Altman’s films, is to begin that pursuit.

CHAPTER III

ROBERT ALTMAN & THE AUDIENCE: A DIALOGIC RELATIONSHIP

“Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction.”

– Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*

“Serious writing about film, like serious thinking in the making of movies, has always been concerned with the relationship of the medium to the world it represents and the audience it captures. . . . [both] begin from the common assumption of this triangulation of the moving picture, the off-screen world, and the audience.”

– Helene Keyssar, *Robert Altman’s America*

While many film scholars and critics have written about the collaboration that occurs between Robert Altman and the actors working on his films, there is essentially no scholarly examination of the collaboration that occurs between the director and his audience in constructing the meaning of a particular film. Altman’s understanding of the role an audience plays in constructing a film’s meaning is documented in numerous published interviews, but this element of his work is rarely examined in depth when the director’s films are discussed. Several key interviews with Altman illustrate the director’s understanding of the audience’s role when it comes to constructing the meaning of particular scenes or even entire movies. In a 1991 interview with Michael Wilmington for the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, reprinted in David Sterritt’s *Innerviews*, Altman explains his belief that a truly good film *requires* the audience to participate in the construction of its meaning:

. . . I feel that once an audience has to work to help make the story by the way they perceive it, and they’re picking things out—their own clues out on the way—that it becomes more enjoyable for them. They become a participant. You come

and meet the screen half way. And so [I'm] just trying to further that. (Sterritt 140)

Furthermore, Altman frequently expresses in interviews his belief that if he were to explain to the public *what* he was trying to accomplish—or even “say”—in a particular film and/or *why* he made the directorial choices he made, he would inscribe on that film a fixed meaning, which would be contrary to his intentions for making movies (Sterritt 41). However, despite Altman’s expressed invitation to the audience to participate in the construction of meaning in his films, his overall “attitude toward the public is . . . complicated, and he has opened himself up to charges of elitism and arrogance” by declaring the “artist and the multitude are natural enemies,” although he quickly clarifies this by “stressing his [own] desire to ‘simplify’ art and make it ‘accessible to the most . . . people’” (Sterritt viii), thereby distinguishing himself from so-called “artsy” film directors.

Not only do these statements about the public, as well as the attitudes that underpin them, illustrate Altman’s awareness of an external audience, but they also suggest a deliberate action on the part of the director to create films that convey particular, although somewhat fluid, meaning—meaning that is to some extent determined by that audience. Further, the director’s use of camera zooms, framing, and overlapping dialogue not only illustrate but also support this intent. In the aforementioned 1991 interview, Altman also discusses his use of these technical devices, telling Wilmington, “the idea is that it puts the audience in the position of, well . . . you better pay attention and watch it and follow closely or you may miss the most important things”

(Altman, qtd. in Sterritt 138), thereby solidifying the audience's role.¹ In terms of classical rhetoric, both Altman's understanding of the role an audience plays in constructing the meaning of a discursive act and his recognition that meaning is fluid and subject to individual interpretation reflect a sophistic stance in the tradition of classical rhetoric. In the sophistic tradition, educators and speakers in Ancient Greece believed tailoring their messages to fit their audiences resulted in more effective discourse. For sophists, then, meaning in discursive acts is always contextual – not fixed – and frequently determined by the participants in those acts. Altman, using overlapping dialogue, a wandering lens, ensemble casts and multiple plot lines, requires his audiences to “pay attention” and become participants in the construction of meaning conveyed by his films.

The Concept of Audience and the Early Sophists

John Stuart Mill addresses the concept of an external audience that participates in the construction of meaning enjoys a long history in his 1833 essay “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties,” published in two installments of *The Monthly Repository*. In the first installment, Mill attempts to articulate for readers “the distinction between poetry and what is not poetry” (2), equating eloquence with a rhetorical act and asserting that “eloquence is feeling pouring itself to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavoring to influence their belief or to move them to passion or to action” (12). Mill notes that many have claimed the distinction is mere format; however, he claims that

¹ For further elaboration on Altman's ideas and beliefs about audience (nee “the public”) and the role audience plays in constructing meaning of his films, see the following interviews: F. Anthony Macklin's “The Artist and the Multitude Are Natural Enemies;” Patricia Aufderheide's “Secret Honor;” Michael Wilmington's “The Long Goodbye;” Peter Keogh's “Death and Hollywood;” and, Beverly Walker's “Altman '91.” All of these interviews have been reprinted in David Sterritt's *Robert Altman Interviews* published by University of Mississippi Press.

poetry frequently is found in both verse and prose forms and concludes that the fundamental difference between these two classifications of expressive, persuasive discourse is that “eloquence is *heard*; [but] poetry is *overheard*” (12). Mill continues, arguing that “eloquence supposes an audience” while “poetry appears [to exist] in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener” (12). Mill’s claim concerning audience is a significant distinction for the study of poetics, but this claim is perhaps most relevant today in its application to the study of rhetoric, since recognizing the existence of an external audience is a crucial aspect of rhetorical studies. Moreover, the recognition and acknowledgement of an external audience, as well as understanding the importance of analyzing and addressing a specific audience through specific rhetorical and stylistic choices, which is the very essence of eloquence, can be traced to the sophistic tradition as practiced by Protagoras of Abdera, Prodicus of Ceos, Gorgias of Leontini, Hippias of Elis, as well as other rhetoricians in Ancient Greece and Rome. In Ancient Greece and Rome, the sophist’s recognition that “eloquence” – read: rhetoric – requires the existence and acknowledgement of an external audience resulted in the crafting of oral presentations and performances that would appeal to the specific audience being addressed. Sophists recognized that variances existed in the knowledge and interests among individuals within an audience as well as within and between audiences collectively. Indeed, the sophists’ ability to not only represent but to also argue multiple perspectives on any given topic results from both practical and philosophical concerns and demonstrates their understanding of the role an audience plays in determining the effectiveness of any rhetorical act.

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions to the understanding of the sophists' concept of audience is Protagoras' doctrine of relativism. While philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates maintain that truth is absolute, "Protagoras asserts that 'Man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not;,' and by 'measure' he means the criterion of truth" (Dillon and Gergel 13). Protagoras posits that nothing is true for all men at all times; and, simultaneously, that "all impressions are equally true and valid" (11). Moreover, Protagoras "was the first to declare that there are two possible positions on every question, opposed to each other" (3) and to prepare arguments along those lines. Not only does Protagoras profess that opposing positions are equally valid, he also claims that knowledge and skills are not inherently present—to greater and lesser degrees—in some men but absent in others. According to Protagoras, men are essentially created by and through their environments, opportunities, and efforts rather than biologically endowed with capacities for knowledge and skills at birth. The sophistic epistemology articulated by Protagoras not only offers insight into his own beliefs, but it also reveals the sophisticated way Protagoras—and sophists in general—could apply this understanding to audience analysis to aid in the creation of discursive acts.

This sophistic understanding of the role audience analysis plays in the creation of discursive acts is especially relevant in analyzing the dialogic nature of Altman's women characters, since the director clearly understands the importance of the relationship between himself, his films, and his audience. In addition to stressing the importance of audience participation in constructing the meaning of his films, Altman also has expressed his desire to communicate something meaningful to his audience. In the

previously discussed 1991 interview with Michael Wilmington, Altman told the interviewer he considers his films “almost an essay, an education to the audience, to say, ‘Stop looking at everything exactly the same way.’ And the fun of films for me is in the discovery of seeing things [from an unfamiliar perspective]” (Altman, qtd. in Sterritt 139). The significance of Altman's understanding of the relationship between his work and his audience should not be underestimated, for he clearly gives his audience a leading role in constructing the meaning of his films. Further, as many film scholars have noted, by the 1960s, the role an audience plays in constructing the meaning of a film was further affected by the audience's enhanced understanding about movies. In *A History of Narrative Film*, David A. Cook claims the demise of the studio system in Hollywood and developments in French and Italian New Wave cinema led to the creation of “a new kind of American cinema . . . for a new American audience. This audience was composed of the first generation in history that had grown up with the visually . . . stimulating medium of television . . . its members knew the language of cinema implicitly” (847-848). By recognizing his audience's understanding of the language of cinema, as well as their role in constructing the meaning of his films, and by challenging audiences to consider things from an unfamiliar perspective, Altman endows his body of film work with a distinct and memorable place in American culture. As Helene Keyssar notes:

Most movies are easy to forget. Either the relationship they establish between the world projected and the viewer is static and predictable or they provide no sufficient grounds to inform or to transform the relationship between the world projected, the viewers, and their culture. The movies that stay on our minds, or that resist forgetting (sometimes disconcertingly), do so because they have either

loosened some previous bond to the world or provided a new tie, a new thread of connection. (Keyssar 4)

At the very least, Altman's films certainly challenge his audience to "'Stop looking at everything exactly the same way'" (Sterritt 139), and through this challenge to his audiences, the director's movies help to loosen existing or previous, perhaps even outdated, "bonds and create new threads of connection" (139) between audience members and their worlds. To truly understand the construction of this dialogic relationship that Altman creates with his audiences, some discussion of Russian language and literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin is necessary. By considering Altman's films through the lens of Bakhtin's linguistic and social theories, we can better understand why Altman's films are so relevant in the examination of American culture during the last half of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century.

Mikhail Bakhtin

Most rhetorical theories acknowledge the role audience awareness plays in shaping a discursive act and examine this role to some degree or another; however, Russian cultural philosopher and language theorist Mikhail Bakhtin examines in detail the relationship between discursive acts, the creators of those acts, and the various audiences for those acts. Bakhtin argues that each discursive act has multiple audiences, and all the audiences participate in the dialogic process of constructing the meaning of the discursive act, a theory that holds particular promise for analyzing the filmic texts created by Altman during a period that spans multiple "waves" in feminist thought. While it could be argued that Bakhtin's theories were never intended to represent either a feminist theory or a film theory, his work is nevertheless relevant and appropriate in this

study as it provides a framework for examining and a vocabulary for discussing Altman's films and the complex relationship that exists between the director, his films, and an always-evolving American audience. Likewise, Bakhtin's theories on language and discourse are crucial for establishing a feminist dialogics, which Karen Hohné and Helen Wussow contend is more than a "rhetorical criticism. It is a way of assessing not only our voices as women but our whole way of acting in a world that is at once our own and someone else's" (xiii). Since very few critical works examine Altman's films from a feminist perspective, Bakhtin's social and linguistic theories will prove especially relevant to this study of Altman's work. Moreover, Hohné and Wussow claim that although Bakhtin never specifically addresses gender in his theoretical writings, his concepts of heteroglossia and dialogism exemplify a feminist perspective of language. Further, they argue:

. . . Bakhtin is accessible and valuable to feminism not only in terms of his philosophy, which is specifically directed at celebrating, highlighting, bringing to the fore the vitalizing force of dialogism – that is, the incorporation and interweaving of various voices to create a sum far greater and more generative than the parts – but even in terms of his [non-linear] form . . . [and] rule-breaking word inventions [that] give voice to his essentially otherly philosophy. (viii)

Clearly, Bakhtin's theories about language are relevant and useful to feminist studies in general and feminist film studies in particular. But, to understand how Bakhtin's concepts of *dialogism*, *polyphony*, *heteroglossia*, and *re-accentuation* can provide greater insight into the relationship between Altman, his work, and his audience, it is necessary to define and examine them in greater depth.

Dialogism

Understanding Bakhtin's concept of *dialogism* is crucial to understanding the symbiotic relationship that exists between director, actor, and audience in an Altman film. Bakhtin introduces the concept of dialogism in *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* and further develops it in his essay "Discourse in the Novel." Bakhtin defines the concept of dialogism through an extended discussion of the contrasts between novels, which Bakhtin considers dialogic since the plot is revealed through discursive acts occurring between multiple characters and narrators, and epic poems, which he considers monologic since the plot is revealed through a single-voice narrator. For Bakhtin, language—specifically "a word" and its meaning—is fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal, and the context for determining the meaning of an utterance is established through the dialogue, which occurs between speakers in a discursive act. A discursive act becomes dialogic when an utterance expects a response. Moreover, even though an utterance might comprise multiple words, the words themselves have no meaning without the context of the discursive act. Bakhtin argues, "The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object. A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way" (Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" 279).

Bakhtin further extends the concept of dialogism by asserting that all discursive acts—"rhetorical forms," to use Bakhtin's words—are in dialogue with past and future discursive acts, whether they are intended for the same audience or for a different audience. Further, neither the speakers in these discursive acts, or rhetorical forms, nor the audience need recognize the dialogic relationships existing between the discursive act

and previous discourse; these dialogic relationships will exist nevertheless. In addition, while Bakhtin developed his theory of dialogism as a way of arguing the superiority of novels as a cultural artifact of language, he acknowledges that “the dialogic orientation of discourse is a phenomenon that is, of course, a property of *any* discourse” (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 279). Therefore, it is only natural that a medium reliant on characters and their dialogues with one another to tell a story—at the very core of almost all movies since the addition of sound to moving pictures, with perhaps a few notable exceptions—would be best understood when examined through this critical framework.

The concept of dialogism is especially relevant to understanding Altman’s films and their significance as a cultural artifact because of the director’s reliance on the use of overlapping and simultaneous dialogues to advance his movies’ plots as well as his ongoing dialogic relationships with his actors and his audiences. As Helene Keyssar argues, Altman’s “films request a dialogic relationship with the audience; they do so in part by disrupting or elongating the connections between signifiers and signification and in part by relocating signs so as to interfere with the anticipated process of meaning” (38). Clearly then, Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism provides an appropriate lens for examining Altman’s films.

Polyphony

Bakhtin introduces and defines his concept of *polyphony* in *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, borrowing the term from music theory and using it to describe a particular relationship existing between the author of and characters within a literary artifact such as a novel. According to Bakhtin’s theory, in a polyphonic literary work, the author allows characters to develop and express their own voices rather than inscribing

upon the characters the author's own voice. For Bakhtin, Dostoyevsky's novels are purely polyphonic since "Dostoyevsky, like Goethe's Prometheus, creates not voiceless slaves (as does Zeus), but *free* people, capable of standing *alongside* their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him" (*Problems* 6). Literally speaking then, *polyphony* is the presence of many voices within a single text, and the many voices not only comprise *literal* voices, but the many voices also represent different rhetorical styles, perspectives, experiences, ideas, and allusions or references to other utterances. Most importantly for Bakhtin, all of these voices develop and express themselves independently of the authorial voice. On the other hand, as Bakhtin argues in his text, "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" produces "a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (*Problems* 6); for Bakhtin, "all authentic dialogue" is, by necessity, polyphonic (*Problems* 69). And, as if to answer the argument that Bakhtin's theory of polyphony is intended for the study of novels, Helene Keyssar notes in *Robert Altman's America*, "the celebration of polyphony—multivoicedness—and openness of discourse that for Bakhtin distinguish novels from all other cultural actions are as explicit in Altman's films as these gestures are 'pure' in Bakhtin's Dostoyevsky" (*Robert Altman's America* 38).

Heteroglossia

Bakhtin further develops his theory about the dialogic nature of discourse in the later essay, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," adding to his lexicon of language descriptors the word *heteroglossia*. In his introduction to *The Dialogic Imagination*, Michael Holquist asserts that "*heteroglossia* is a master trope at the heart of all [Bakhtin's] other projects, one more fundamental than . . . 'polyphony' or

‘carnivalization’” (xviii). According to Bakhtin, *heteroglossia* exists “*within* a language . . . [and] is the problem of internal differentiation, the stratification characteristic of any national language” (“From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse” 68); it “permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized)” (“Discourse in the Novel” 263). Simply put, *heteroglossia* is the presence of “speech diversity within language” (“From the Prehistory” 68), which Bakhtin distinguishes from *polyglossia*, or the presence of more than one national language in any discursive act or text. Many readers might confuse *heteroglossia* with *polyphony*; however, the distinction between the two is much like the distinction between the rhetorical concepts of “voice” and “dialect”—while dialect might be one element of voice, voice is more than simply dialect. Moreover, a standard or written and spoken language must be established in all national languages for the non-standard variation to exist; heteroglossia represents the struggle between the two in any dialogic relationship. Holquist claims, “Heteroglossia is Bakhtin’s way of referring, in any utterance of any kind, to the peculiar interaction between the two fundamentals of all communication” (“Introduction,” *The Dialogic Imagination* xix).

Canonization and Reaccentuation

Another crucial idea concerning context from Bakhtin’s theories about language and discourse is the concept of *reaccentuation*, which Bakhtin most fully explores in the essay “Discourse in the Novel,” found in *The Dialogic Imagination*. In this essay, Bakhtin claims there are two primary conditions that result from the “process of transformation of language [that] occur at a very rapid rate of change”—*canonization* and *reaccentuation*. Through the first process, canonization, a new language standard is

developed, or an existing language standard becomes altered in some way, and true *heteroglossia* is lost; *reaccentuation*, however, maintains a heteroglot language. Further, through canonization, language becomes a means of expressing authorial intentions, and words and phrases lose “their flavor of belonging to another[‘s] language” (Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel” 417-418). Bakhtin himself allows that the second process, *reaccentuation*, is “considerably more complicated” (“Discourse” 419) than canonization. Bakhtin contends that reaccentuation of “images and languages” occurs “when the dialogue of languages has experienced great change, the language of an image begins to sound in a different way or is bathed in a different light, or is perceived against a different dialogizing background” (“Discourse” 419). More simply stated, “reaccentuation changes the value, nature, and interrelation of voices visible in a genuinely ‘prosaic image’ of language or languages” (Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* 364). The concepts of *canonization* and *reaccentuation* are useful in any study of Altman’s films because many of them are adaptations of previously published literary texts.

Feminist Theory and Bakhtin

Today, the word *feminism* itself suggests a dialogic meaning, a meaning that has been contested and changed over the course of time, depending upon the social context in which the concept appears. Today, the term *post-feminism* or *postfeminism* was often used in place of *feminism*, suggesting we have moved into a new realm of social and cultural awareness when it comes to the discussion of women. Like its predecessor *feminism*, the term *postfeminism* suggests a dialogic—and contested—meaning as well. Fien Adriaens, a researcher at the Department of Communication Studies at Ghent

University in Belgium contends that *postfeminism*, particularly in literature, represents “three dominant but diverging visions” (1). Adriaens identifies these distinct visions of *postfeminism* as being: first, a political position of confrontation, second, a historical shift within feminism, and third, a backlash against feminism “where a celebration of neoconservative, traditional values becomes prominent” (1). Clearly, the word *postfeminism*—and the concept it represents—has no fixed, universal meaning; a multitude of voices from the past, present, and future are present in the very definition of the word, providing a perfect illustration of Bakhtin’s theories on language and culture.

For Bakhtin, dialogism, or the “open-ended dialogue,” is “the single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human life” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 293). In their introduction to *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic*, Bauer and McKinstry connect contemporary feminist theory and Bakhtin’s theories concerning language and dialogue, arguing that Bakhtin’s concepts are essential elements of feminist discourse. According to Bauer and McKinstry, Bakhtin’s dialogism:

is central to feminist practice because it invites new possibilities for activism and change. Dialogism – like standpoint theory – has as its base the understanding that people’s responses are conditional, human circumstances are irreducible and contingent. Dialogic consciousness or standpoint depends on neither essentialism or truth, but on context and condition. A feminist dialogics is not just agnostic or oppositional; it also suggests an identity in dialectic response, always open and ongoing. (2-3)

Further, they argue that according to Bakhtin’s theory of language, dialogism is essential if we are to make progress toward achieving a truly egalitarian—heteroglot—society, one

in which multiple and varied truths are not only tolerated or even accepted, but they are expected and necessary.

Feminist Film Studies and Robert Altman

Altman's films include more than 150 major female characters, and the majority of those likely would be considered leading roles if it were not for the director's use of ensemble casts in most of his films. In addition, while he admits that he does not "sit and think 'Oh, I'll use a female character,'" he acknowledges he definitely has an "interest in strong female characters" (Sterritt 194). However, as noted previously, many women—particularly in the early 1970s—found Altman's Margaret O'Houlihan character to be the antithesis of a strong female character; in fact, they found her to be a misogynistic representation of women. While Altman agrees with some of the critics' assessment of this character, he stresses that it is society and its institutions that are misogynistic, not himself, and that he merely is trying to highlight the misogyny that already exists in American culture.²

Further, it is a bit ironic that a director, whose films generally feature strong female characters, such as Robert Altman and his films, would be criticized as being a misogynist while other directors who rarely, if ever, feature strong female characters in their films are not called out for the male-centered world view represented in most Hollywood films. When reminded in a 1975 interview, reprinted in *Altman on Altman*, that his films had come under fire from feminists for their "adolescent view of women as

² The depiction of Margaret O'Houlihan in *M*A*S*H* is topic that recurs in Altman interviews throughout his career, and his response to the accusation of being a misogynist is always the same. In Altman's view, he was attempting to depict the way in which women were treated in the military and other male-dominated institutions; he was not attempting to depict his *own* treatment of women. For examples of these interviews, see the collected interviews in *Altman on Altman* and *Robert Altman Interviews* as well as most any interview given by the director that discusses this particular film.

sex objects,” Altman explained that he believes “women were treated and are treated as sex objects. They can’t blame me for the condition because I report it” (qtd. In Sterritt 49).

Helene Keyssar considers *That Cold Day in the Park*, *3 Women*, *Images*, and *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* Robert Altman’s “women films” and argues that in these films, “the relationships of women to their contexts . . . are insistently explored” (200). Film critic Richard Corliss adds to the list of “women films” *Fool for Love* and *Vincent & Theo*. Robert Self changes the label of these films from “women films” to “women’s films” in his work, *Robert Altman’s Subliminal Reality* but does not limit his discussion of women in Altman’s work to these films. Rather, Self examines Altman’s women throughout the director’s body of work in his text, most thoroughly discussing women and feminist theory in the chapter “Resisting Women.” Self contends that feminist criticism “has been particularly interested in the fact that the classical narrative cinema offers a relatively stable subject position for the male spectator situated before a transparent and naturalizing discourse that relegates women to positions of absence, silence, and marginality” (*Robert Altman’s Subliminal Reality* 148).

Self argues that rather than simply reinforce the supremacy of the male gaze and its effects on women in American culture, Altman’s films instead “examine the effects of a system that identifies women as the objects of male desire, dependent upon male awareness . . .” (149). Clearly, whatever label is applied to these films—women films, women’s films, or something altogether different—there is no denying that these films and the rest of Altman’s oeuvre present a sense and awareness of women that transcend the usual Hollywood representation—an awareness that is both diverse and complex, an

awareness that is truly dialogic and distinctly American. While many working in the film industry—actors, crew members, screenwriters, producers, and the rest—have noted the dialogic nature of Altman’s creative process and movies, fellow director Paul Thomas Anderson perhaps said it most effectively: “Watching his films as a fan, then later as an observer on his sets, one thing holds true: it’s impossible to see where the conversation ends and the scene begins” (Anderson, *Altman on Altman* xv).

Altman’s six-decades-long career spans a period in American culture when conversations about women, as well as their rights and roles in American society, were constantly occurring and evolving; therefore, a critical theory emphasizing the importance of dialogues and multi-voicedness becomes an essential tool for analyzing the director’s body of work. A critical framework established in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, a framework that privileges the dialogic and polyphonic nature of speech acts, provides such a tool. Through Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, we can begin to understand and contextualize American culture as it evolves through time and is captured and reflected in Altman’s films. For Bakhtin, nothing provides a better reflection of a society—or its values, beliefs, and customs—than does the art and literature a society produces; and, for Altman, his movies *were* his art and literature.

CHAPTER IV

“THE SULTRY BITCH WITH THE FIRE IN HER EYES:” EXAMINING THE WOMEN IN ALTMAN’S FILMS – THE ’60s & ’70s

*“Women have been subjugated in our society. Consequently, they’ve had to become manipulative. They have more disguises and facets than men. Those are the kinds of things that interest me, where we’re dealing with disguises, where we make assumptions and we’re almost always wrong.”*¹ – Robert Altman

If asked to name a female character in a Robert Altman film, many—if not most—people familiar with the director’s work would probably name “Hot Lips” O’Houlihan from *M*A*S*H*. Controversial and outrageous, the notorious shower scene in which O’Houlihan is humiliated was added to the screenplay by Altman during filming; in fact, “Hot Lips” O’Houlihan, the character played by Sally Kellerman in the film, had only a few lines in the original screenplay. The character “Hot Lips”—as she is ultimately presented in the film—is the product of collaboration between Altman, Kellerman, and the rest of the cast, not the creation of a misogynist film director. Still, the image of a humiliated “Hot Lips”, crouching naked in the shower while the entire camp looks on and laughs at her expense, continues to haunt Altman’s legacy as a film director.

In his review of Ron Marin’s documentary *Altman* (2015), film critic Mark Kermode declares the film “hagiographic” and expresses his frustration that the film about Altman’s “inspiring/exasperating career” fails to address “the director’s flaws [such as] his problematic portrayals of women” (“*Altman* Review – a Hagiographic Romp”). Kermode is not alone in recalling what has often been perceived as a misogynistic

¹ This quote is taken from a 1977 interview with Altman conducted by Betty Jeffries Demby, published in the June 19, 1977 edition of *The New York Times*. The interview was published under the headline “Robert Altman Talks About His Life and His Art.”

portrayal of women in Altman's films, as this seems to be a common misperception of the director's work.



Fig. 11. Sally Kellerman as “Hot Lips” O’Houlihan. *From M*A*S*H.*

Should a director whose career includes the “creation” of more than 110 major female characters in thirty-four feature films be defined by *one* female character in *one* film?

To collectively label Altman's body of feature films as misogynist and his depiction of women as “problematic” is inaccurate and insulting to the women and men who worked on the films—particularly the women actors and Altman himself—as well as to the audiences who enjoyed these films. Moreover, doing so ignores the fact that throughout Altman's career in the movie industry, the characters in his films have been the creation of collaboration between Altman and the actors working on his films. That is, they are the creation of the dialogic process that exists between the director, the actors, and the audiences. And while that process might seem overly philosophical and hard to measure, in a more practical and measurable sense, his films have continually featured

more women in speaking roles than the industry averages, even when using the most recent industry averages available today.

According to the most recent data collected by the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University, the ratio of females to males in speaking roles in 2016 films was thirty-two percent females to sixty-eight percent males, which means males outnumber the females by more than two-to-one. By comparison, Altman's thirty-four feature films released between 1967 and 2006 include 990 speaking roles; and, of those 990 roles, 428 were females and 562 were males, meaning slightly more than forty-three percent of all credited speaking roles in Altman's films went to female actors (see Table 1). Again, it should be noted these roles span the years from 1967 through 2006, yet the total number of female roles exceeds the 2016 industry average by more than ten percent, a statistic that would hardly suggest a misogynistic approach to filmmaking. However, these numbers alone do not tell the complete story; they are not the only factor to be considered here. Women who have worked with Altman on his films have repeatedly praised him for creating an environment in which they could develop their own voices and collaborate with the director.²

² See for example, interviews with Lily Tomlin, Cher, Sally Kellerman, Julianne Moore, Meryl Streep, and many others included in *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography* and the documentary film *Altman*.

Table 1

Gender Breakdown of Credited Characters in Robert Altman's Films

Film & Year	Female	Male
<i>Countdown</i> (1967)	2	10
<i>That Cold Day in the Park</i> (1969)	7	6
<i>M*A*S*H</i> (1970)	6	20
<i>Brewster McCloud</i> (1970)	9	19
<i>McCabe & Mrs. Miller</i> (1971)	12	28
<i>Images</i> (1972)	2	4
<i>The Long Goodbye</i> (1973)	5	19
<i>Thieves Like Us</i> (1974)	7	8
<i>California Split</i> (1974)	7	8
<i>Nashville</i> (1975)	15	22
<i>Buffalo Bill and the Indians</i> (1976)	5	21
<i>3 Women</i> (1977)	10	4
<i>A Wedding</i> (1978)	26	25
<i>Quintet</i> (1979)	7	8
<i>A Perfect Couple</i> (1979)	11	10
<i>Health</i> (1980)	16	9
<i>Popeye</i> (1980)	18	35
<i>Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean</i> (1982)	11	1
<i>Streamers</i> (1983)	0	16
<i>Secret Honor</i> (1984)	0	1
<i>O.C. and Stiggs</i> (1985)	14	34
<i>Fool for Love</i> (1985)	6	5
<i>Beyond Therapy</i> (1987)	12	9
<i>Vincent & Theo</i> (1990)	12	21
<i>The Player</i> (1992)	11	20
<i>Short Cuts</i> (1993)	18	25
<i>Prêt-à-Porter</i> (1994)	20	23
<i>Kansas City</i> (1996)	8	22
<i>The Gingerbread Man</i> (1998)	23	42
<i>Cookie's Fortune</i> (1999)	10	19
<i>Dr. T & the Women</i> (2000)	70	9
<i>Gosford Park</i> (2001)	21	24
<i>The Company</i> (2003)	18	25
<i>A Prairie Home Companion</i> (2006)	11	10
Totals	428	562

Ratio of women to men in Altman's feature films from 1967 through 2006: 43% to 57%

Ratio of women to men in all feature films in the year 2016: 32% to 68%

The 1960s and 1970s

As noted in Chapter One, the film industry experienced a radical transformation in the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s, evolving from the powerful studio model and star system that marked the “Golden Age of Hollywood” and into a movement characterized by independence and creativity. Under the powerful studio model that existed up until the mid-1950s, studio executives could predict with some certainty that films audiences would embrace, and—since the major production studios owned chains of first-run movie theaters—they could ensure a film’s release on a given number of screens sufficient to guarantee a certain level of profitability. Peter Lev notes in his introduction to *American Films of the 1970s* that studio executives up until the early 1960s could guarantee that “a well-made film following established conventions” would find an audience and generate a predictable income for the studios. However, as the television industry grew throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, the audience for feature films began to dwindle. As Lev notes, the “old studio system fell apart” and “stars and genres were no longer enough to sell a picture” (xvi). The period that arose from the collapse of the studio system would later become known as the New Hollywood movement, which is discussed in greater detail in Chapters One and Two; it refers to a particular time in film history rather than a single, overarching style of filmmaking or a specific group of filmmakers.

Films produced during the New Hollywood movement both reflected and appealed to more relaxed American social standards toward violence, sexuality, and other previously taboo subjects. Thanks in part to the demise of the Hays Code, the unofficial name for The Motion Picture Code of 1930, which established standards for “moral

decency” and determined what could or could not be shown in movies, directors experienced unprecedented freedom in determining the content of their films. One of the most distinguishing characteristics of the films from this period is the creative freedom afforded film directors, freedom that allowed directors to take new thematic, narrative, and technical risks when making their movies. Audiences, already disillusioned by Viet Nam and Watergate, were more open to the counterculture depictions of American society reflected in film during this period and welcomed these risks.

The social and political events of the early 1960s not only inspired the counterculture movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, but they also gave rise to the second wave of feminist activism in the United States, a period when feminists across the nation were fighting to open existing systems and hierarchies to females and males alike and provide women with the same opportunities that had been afforded to men. Feminist activism during this period is collectively referred to as the women’s liberation movement even though the activists comprised many socially, economically, and politically diverse groups and organizations. Young college-educated women, influenced by the civil rights struggles of the early 1960s and the protests against the Viet Nam conflict were just as likely to be drawn into the movement as were middle-class working women who had come to realize that few options for advancement existed for women in the work place. Further, the movement was not limited to women only; men from various social, economic, and political backgrounds became involved in the quest for gender equality. While many scholars and social theorists point to the protests at the 1968 Miss America pageant as the beginning of this movement, historian and feminist Linda Gordon argues it would be impossible to connect the movement’s beginnings to a single event or

protest and identifies multiple events and protests occurring across the U.S. which collectively gave the movement voice and direction (Cobble et. al., *Feminism Unfinished* 71-75). These events and protests addressed a wide spectrum of concerns including employment opportunities and promotions, equal pay, childcare, female sexuality, access to birth control, and reproductive freedom.

Just as no single event or protest could be labeled as the “official” beginning of the movement, there is no rigid hierarchical structure identified for governing the movement during this period. Instead, the women’s liberation movement during the 1960s and 1970s can best be understood as a collection of community and social awareness groups seeking to expand opportunities for females in education, the workplace, and in society in general. Moreover, while there were certainly activists and “leaders” within the movement, the movement’s overarching philosophy was more egalitarian in nature, recognizing a “range of feminisms” (71) and validating multiple feminist perspectives within the overarching movement. Like the feminist movement, the women in Altman’s 1970s films are socially—although not racially—diverse, reflecting the changing social roles and mores in American culture. Table 2 identifies the major women characters in Altman’s films from this period.

Table 2

Major Female Characters in Altman's 1970s Films

<u>Female Protagonists & Major Characters in Altman's Films – 1967-1979</u>			
Character	Actor	Film	Year
Mickey Stegler	Joanna Moore	<i>Countdown</i>	1967
Jean	Barbara Baxley	<i>Countdown</i>	1967
Frances Austin	Sandy Dennis	<i>That Cold Day in the Park</i>	1969
"Hot Lips" O'Houlihan	Sally Kellerman	<i>M*A*S*H</i>	1970
Lt. "Dish" Schneider	Joanne Pflug	<i>M*A*S*H</i>	1970
Louise	Sally Kellerman	<i>Brewster McCloud</i>	1970
Suzanne Davis	Shelley Duvall	<i>Brewster McCloud</i>	1970
Mrs. Miller	Julie Christie	<i>McCabe & Mrs. Miller</i>	1971
Ida Coyle	Shelley Duvall	<i>McCabe & Mrs. Miller</i>	1971
Cathryn	Susannah York	<i>Images</i>	1972
Eileen Wade	Nina Van Pallandt	<i>The Long Goodbye</i>	1973
Keechie	Shelley Duvall	<i>Thieves Like Us</i>	1974
Barbara Miller	Ann Prentiss	<i>California Split</i>	1974
Susan Peters	Gwen Welles	<i>California Split</i>	1974
Connie White	Karen Black	<i>Nashville</i>	1975
Barbara Jean	Ronee Blakely	<i>Nashville</i>	1975
Opal	Geraldine Chapman	<i>Nashville</i>	1975
L.A. Joan	Shelley Duvall	<i>Nashville</i>	1975
Albuquerque	Barbara Harris	<i>Nashville</i>	1975
Mary	Cristina Raines	<i>Nashville</i>	1975
Linnea Reese	Lily Tomlin	<i>Nashville</i>	1975
Sueleen Gay	Gwen Welles	<i>Nashville</i>	1975
Annie Oakley	Geraldine Chapman	<i>Buffalo Bill and the Indians</i>	1976
Millie Lammoreaux	Shelly Duvall	<i>3 Women</i>	1977
Pinky Rose	Sissy Spacek	<i>3 Women</i>	1977
Willie Hart	Janice Rule	<i>3 Women</i>	1977
Tulip Brenner	Carol Burnett	<i>A Wedding</i>	1978
Muffin Brenner	Amy Stryker	<i>A Wedding</i>	1978
Buffy Brenner	Mia Farrow	<i>A Wedding</i>	1978
Regina Corelli	Nina Van Pallandt	<i>A Wedding</i>	1978
Rita Billingsley	Geraldine Chapman	<i>A Wedding</i>	1978
Florence Farmer	Lauren Hutton	<i>A Wedding</i>	1978
Ambrosia	Bibi Anderson	<i>Quintet</i>	1979
Vivia	Brigitte Fossey	<i>Quintet</i>	1979
Deuca	Nina Van Pallandt	<i>Quintet</i>	1979
Sheila Shea	Marta Heflin	<i>A Perfect Couple</i>	1979
Skye 147	Ann Ryerson	<i>A Perfect Couple</i>	1979

Although Altman's films from this period all feature women in prominent roles, there are a few of the director's movies during this time that focus primarily on the male characters and emphasize male-dominated story arcs. These films include *The Long Goodbye* (1973) and *California Split* (1974), both of which star Elliott Gould; and, *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976) and *Quintet* (1979), both of which star Paul Newman. While *California Split* is primarily a buddy movie, with a predominantly male cast, it does feature two female characters portrayed in a way that would support some elements of feminist thought. Consequently, this film will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Like *California Split*, *The Long Goodbye* features a predominantly male cast and is adapted from Raymond Chandler's 1953 Phillip Marlowe detective novel of the same name. However, Altman makes a few notable changes to the story while maintaining *most* of the original context, albeit reaccentuated for the 1970s; that is, displaced and updated by about twenty years. One of the notable changes involves the character Eileen Wade, Chandler's femme fatale in his original novel. In the novel, she murders both Sylvia Lennox, Terry Lennox's wife, and her husband, Roger Wade. She tries unsuccessfully to seduce Marlowe and is frequently described as a woman who is as cruel as she is beautiful. In the film, Eileen Wade is portrayed as beautiful but innocent of all crimes except one: she keeps the stolen money Terry Lennox gives her rather than returning it to the gangster Lennox. Since Altman's adaptation of Chandler's novel is considered a subversion of a classic film noir, we can read Altman's version of Eileen Wade as a subversion of the femme fatale. She is beautiful, but she leads no man astray and is not the cause of anyone's demise. In the closing scene of *The Long Goodbye*, after

Marlowe has shot Terry Lennox and is walking down the path away from his body, he passes Eileen Wade, presumably on her way to see Lennox: and, like most Altman women, Eileen Wade not only survives, but she is also free from Terry Lennox.

Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson (1976) is ostensibly a story about Buffalo Bill after he retires from his career as an Army scout and takes up acting in his own Wild West show. However, in a more general sense, the film is really about the ways in which men create myths and legends and then allow them to work their way into our collective memory to become our shared history. In a film that is primarily about creating myths and legends from the ordinary substance of men's lives, it is ironic that the only character with true substance, talent, and ability is the woman, Annie Oakley. As audiences can see from the film, Buffalo Bill's legend derives more from scenes created for his Wild West show than it does from actual historical events.

Quintet (1979) is perhaps Altman's bleakest film. In this film, Altman creates a post-apocalyptic, dystopian world in which a board game becomes a living allegory for human existence. Although the film features three women characters with prominent roles, their characters seem to fit stereotypical molds for women in film: Vivia, the protagonist's younger, pregnant wife, played by Brigitte Fossey; Deuca, the female business owner who runs the hotel, played by Nina Van Pallandt; and Ambrosia, the attractive, single woman who seduces the protagonist only to turn against him later in the film, played by Bibi Andersson. There are some elements of feminist thought evident in the characterizations of these women, such as their survival skills and independence, but they are all three killed in the film. Consequently, their deaths negate any enlightening, positive message their characterizations might have otherwise provided for audiences.

Agency and Sexuality: A Woman's Perspective

Considered one of Altman's "misunderstood and generally unloved" feature films (Danks 15), *Countdown* (1967) marks the director's debut in the Hollywood feature film industry. The director's first two non-industrial films—a feature film, *The Delinquents*, and a documentary, *The James Dean Story*—were self-produced and produced outside the Hollywood environment and film production system. Although *Countdown* features many of Altman's trademark characteristics, overlapping dialogue, tracking shots and zooms, and an ambiguous not-so-happy ending, Warner Brothers maintained close control over the final product, resulting in a film that seems less "Altmanesque" than the director's films that follow. Still, there are important connections between *Countdown* and the Altman films that would follow it.

One of the more interesting anecdotes concerning the connection between *Countdown* and Altman's later films concerns the story itself. Altman had tried to option *The Pilgrim Project*, the novel from which the film's screenplay was adapted,³ but lost out to Warner Brothers, who eventually hired Altman to direct the film. Screenwriter Loring Mandel also relates discussions between Altman and himself concerning the use of overlapping dialogue in the screenplay, something which Mandel had picked up from his observations working with NASA on the adaptation, and something for which Altman had a natural affinity (Zuckoff 144). However, perhaps the most significant connection between *Countdown* and Altman's remaining feature films is its focus on the characters and their lives. According to Altman, his goal in making *Countdown* was "to talk about

³ This is reported in multiple interviews and secondary sources. See, for example, Mitchell Zuckoff's *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography*, David Breskin's *Inner Views: Filmmakers in Conversation*, Katherine Altman's *Altman*, or Robert Altman and David Thompson's *Altman on Altman* for more discussion on this aspect of *Countdown*.

this astronaut program in terms of real people rather than heroes . . . and to underplay the hardware and suspense” (Zuckoff 147). Unlike most conventional space movies, the most interesting characters in *Countdown* are not the astronauts themselves, but rather their wives – the women characters, Mickey and Jean.



Fig. 12. The “Unsuccessful” Astronaut’s Wife. *From Countdown.*

Jean, whose husband Chiz was *not* selected to pilot the spacecraft, which will soon be landing on the Moon, does her best to cope with her husband’s anger and resentment. In this scene, she joins the piano player in song while Chiz and the other astronauts are at a nearby table, celebrating NASA’s upcoming moon launch. By focusing audience attention on Jean rather than the astronauts at the nearby table, Altman invites viewers to reconsider who and what really matter in this story about landing a man on the moon. Pictured: Barbara Baxley as Jean

As actor Michael Murphy recalls about the characters in *Countdown*, it was the complexities of the women’s lives—being married to an astronaut and their abilities to cope—that interested Altman most about the story, and that became the focus of the film’s narrative. Murphy said Altman “shifted [the focus] off the action of the space shot into the sociological thing of being married to one of those guys. What it does to your soul” (145). Not only are the women one of the primary focuses of the film in their day-to-day struggles to cope with being an “astronaut’s wife,” but even in the most climactic moments of the movie Altman chooses to focus on the women and the effects of their

husband's choices on their lives. For example, when astronaut Lee Stegler is racing against time to find the space station on the moon, which will allow him to survive until another moonshot can be arranged to retrieve him, it is not the astronaut the audience is watching. Instead, it is his wife Mickey who gets our attention when we, the audience, realize the astronaut will likely die.



Fig. 13. “What am I supposed to do while he’s dying?” *From Countdown.*

Mickey Stegler sits alone outside NASA, staring at the moon where her husband has landed nearly two hours earlier. Lee Stigler has not made his way to the space station, and NASA already considers him lost on the moon, yet in this scene, his wife Mickey is the focus of our attention. Pictured: Joanna Moore as Mickey Stegler

As the character at the physical center of the frame and in the center of action in the final scenes, Mickey—not her husband Lee, the astronaut whose survival is in jeopardy—becomes the focus of the audience’s attention and awareness. We are focused on Mickey as she sits alone outside and wonders what *her* behavior should be at that precise moment when her husband will likely die alone on the moon. Again, it is through the choice of focusing our attention, and the story, on the lives of these women that invites the audience to consider who and what we believe is most important. However, the studio did not appreciate Altman’s direction of the actors or the narrative focus of *Countdown*. According to Altman, Jack Warner fired him before the final editing of the

film,⁴ and an alternate ending for the film was shot without Altman's input. Later, however, poor response to the alternate ending led Warner to bring Altman back into the studio to re-edit the film's final scenes, according to Altman and actor James Caan. Consequently, *Countdown* bears many Altmanesque features, particularly in the depiction of its women characters.

Altman's attempt to option another novel, *That Cold Day in the Park* by Richard Miles, was more successful than his attempt to option *Countdown*, an occurrence perhaps owing to the explicit nature and taboo themes of *That Cold Day in the Park*. Where *Countdown* ostensibly provides an exploration of heroic themes—space travel, the conquering of hostile worlds, and such—Altman's film *That Cold Day in the Park* (1969) provides an exploration of human sexuality and relationships. Unfortunately, although Altman was able to option the novel, he had no viable screenplay, nor did he have the financial backing needed to make the motion picture. Ultimately, a chance meeting with agent George Litto led to Altman's partnership with Don Factor and his financing of the film's production.⁵ Factor's initial investment in the project allowed Altman to hire Gillian Freeman, a London-based novelist and screenwriter, to write the adapted screenplay for the film; the film's primary departure from the novel is that the exploration of *human* sexuality and relationships presented in the novel becomes exclusively an exploration of *female* sexuality in the film.

⁴ Altman's firing by Jack Warner during the final editing of *Countdown* is documented in multiple interviews with Altman and the actors who worked on the film, including Michael Murphey and James Caan. For examples of these discussions, see *Altman on Altman* or *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography*. William Conrad and James Lydon, co-producers of the B-motion picture for Warner Brothers, dispute the claim that Altman was fired; however, they do not dispute that Conrad directed an alternate ending for the film, an ending more in tune with Hollywood conventions and Jack Warner's desires for the film.

⁵ This aspect of *That Cold Day in the Park* is discussed in *Altman on Altman*, *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography*, and multiple published interviews with the director throughout his film career.

While Altman does not take a screenwriting credit for the film, Freeman credits Altman with the change in direction the film's theme takes in its deviation from the original source novel, noting the director told her that he only wanted to use the "bare bones of the book" (McGilligan 281). According to Freeman, Altman wanted to drop from the film the novel's exploration of homosexuality, the public performance of sexual acts, and "almost all the other relationships and details" (281) and shift the focus entirely to the exploration of female sexuality through the main character, Frances Austin. The resulting film, then, more accurately represents Altman's vision and voice than it does the source novel from which it was adapted. Perhaps it is this understanding of the film as representing Altman's vision and voice that has led many critics to consider *That Cold Day in the Park* to be the director's "first genuinely personal film" (McGilligan 278). And while some might argue that a film exploring female sexuality and desire could not be "genuinely personal" in its relationship to a male director, clearly the film presents Altman's understanding, or at least an attempt to understand, the world from a female perspective. And, in the sense that Altman, to one degree or another, is involved in all aspects of making *That Cold Day in the Park*—from optioning the novel, securing financing, scriptwriting, scouting locations, directing, coproducing, up to and including the editing the final cut—the film clearly represents his vision and voice while attempting to capture the world through the eyes and experiences of a single woman living in late-1960s America.



Fig. 14. Frances Austin Watches the Object of Her Sexual Fantasy, The Boy. *From That Cold Day in the Park.*

This shot captures Frances' desire for The Boy as she watches his reflection in the mirror while he undresses. Pictured: Sandy Dennis

The film not only creates characters who represent obvious reversals of gender stereotypes, such as a female protagonist who controls the money and power in all her relationships, a male housekeeper who maintains domestic order in her home, and a young male “innocent” who is exploited and victimized by the older female; but, it also openly examines the experiences of contemporary women. Issues that real women might experience or discuss among themselves—such as a trip to the gynecologist or concerns about birth control—become scenes and overheard conversations in the film. It also is worth noting that Altman's attempt to capture and convey the experiences of female protagonist in an open manner as she struggles with interpersonal relationships and her own sexuality and desires echoes some elements of the “consciousness raising” efforts of the women's liberation movement that began to flourish by the late 1960s.



Fig. 15. Frances Visits the Gynecologist's Office to Obtain Birth Control. *From That Cold Day in the Park.*

As Frances registers with the nurse for her doctor's appointment, viewers overhear the conversation of other women patients in the office as they discuss intimate subjects such as sexual relationships, birth control, and even the size and sexual performance of men. Pictured: Sandy Dennis, standing at the patient window.

The phrase "consciousness raising" was coined in 1968 by the women's liberation movement to reference a process, based on common ground and shared experiences of being female, where women began to speak openly about personal issues and experiences that had previously been taboo.⁶ These previously taboo personal matters included topics such as women's orgasms, birth control methods, pelvic exams, breast cancer, abortions, marital relationships, and male sexual performance to name just a few.

⁶ For more thorough discussion of the consciousness raising discussions of taboo subjects during the women's liberation movement, see works by Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, Astrid Henry and many other contemporary feminist historians and writers.



Fig. 16. Frances in Stirrups at the Birth Control Clinic. *From That Cold Day in the Park.*

Frances must undergo a pelvic examination before receiving the birth control pills she is seeking. While a shot such as this might seem voyeuristic, it creates common ground between the film and the women in its audience by presenting an intimate experience all women can understand and relate to. Further, Altman's use of the zoom in this scene serves to change the relationship between the audience and the film.

As Gordon argues in "The Women's Liberation Movement" from *Feminism Unfinished*, the premise behind the consciousness raising process was that through encouraging discussion among women about these previously taboo subjects, awareness of shared beliefs and experiences as well as social norms and expectations about these issues could be raised and therefore be challenged. For many feminists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, consciousness raising not only laid "the groundwork for activism . . . it *was* activism, for in changing consciousness, it made social change" (Cobble 80). Moreover, while some critics might consider the scenes depicting Frances Austin's trip to the birth control clinic and her resulting pelvic examination to be a voyeuristic objectification of women, it clearly echoes the dialogue of the consciousness raising discussions being led by many feminists during the women's liberation movement during the second wave of feminist activism. Furthermore, the film's exploration of female

sexuality and desire, and the very direct manner in which *That Cold Day in the Park* delves into the intimate, firsthand experiences of multiple women characters combine to establish a dialogic relationship between the film, its director and actors, and American women in the late 1960s—not only those women participating in the women’s liberation movement, but also those women and men who might benefit or learn from it.

In her essay, “The Locus for the Other,” Lisa Gasbarrone asserts that Bakhtin would consider monologic discourse to be “grounded in patriarchal myth” and “subvertible only through transgression of the linguistic and literary laws that govern them” (Hohne and Wussow 4). Clearly, *That Cold Day in the Park* transgresses and subverts not only the conventional male subjectivity of the late 1960s film industry, but also the societal expectations and norms for female subjectivity. Through its exploration of female sexuality and realistic depiction of experiences women share—such as the visit to the gynecologist’s office and the discussion of birth control methods—the film seeks to disrupt male subjectivity and invite women to participate in a dialogue, not just about sexuality, but about what it means to be a woman living in the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, it seems typical moviegoers in the late 1960s were still unready to join the dialogue Altman was inviting through the film *That Cold Day in the Park*. The film was neither a commercial nor a critical success; however, Altman’s next project would become his most successful film in terms of capital. *M*A*S*H*, released just seven months after *That Cold Day in the Park* in January 1970, fared much better with critics and audiences alike, and became the third-highest grossing film of the year, bringing in an estimated \$81.6 million, or \$477.2 million if adjusted for inflation and 2017 ticket prices. Further, the National Film Preservation Board for inclusion in National Film

Registry in 1996 selected the film. Yet despite the film's financial success and popularity with critics and audiences, Altman's depiction of women characters in the film remains a subject of contention for most scholars and critics. In fact, "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan and the female characters in *M*A*S*H* (1970) are generally included in discussions about the "problematic," "stereotypical," or "negative" depictions of women in Altman films either by critics using the women as examples to support their argument that women characters are objectified and depicted negatively in the director's films, or by Altman in his efforts to defend his depiction of women in his films. Even more recent critical works, such as Frank Caso's *Robert Altman In the American Grain*, published in 2015, take issue with Altman's women characters in *M*A*S*H*. According to Caso, Altman's response to critics that he was trying to show audiences "that is how males act in the military" was "a disingenuous answer" to criticism since the problem was not how *males* act in the military, but rather it was "how the female characters act" (69). However, Caso's claims that actions of the female characters in Altman's films are the real problem seems to echo the victim-blaming discourse still so common today; as a result, Caso's argument is neither feminist nor useful to this study.

Moreover, this criticism of Altman based on the depiction of the female characters in the film—especially the "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan character—is ironic given that the character as portrayed in the film is not solely Altman's creation. With *M*A*S*H*, Altman and the actors working in the film fully participate in the creation of the characters and the dialogue, illustrating Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. This is clearly evidenced in the development of the character, Margaret O'Houlihan, as the character is the result of the collaboration between Altman and Sally Kellerman, the actor

cast to play the role. The anecdote that perhaps best illustrates the collaborative relationship Altman creates with the actors working on *M*A*S*H* and the extent to which this collaboration influences character development in the resulting film is told by Sally Kellerman in *Robert Altman, The Oral Biography*, by Mitchell Zuckoff. In Zuckoff's text, Kellerman relates the story of her original audition for *M*A*S*H* and her desire to be cast in the role of Lt. Maria "Dish" Schnieder who was considered the leading female character in the screenplay as it was originally written. After auditioning, according to Kellerman, Altman tells her rather than casting her as Lt. Dish, he instead will give her the "best part in the picture: 'Hot Lips.'" She replied, "Really? Oh my god!" and accepted. However, Kellerman said after reading the screenplay she realized the character had "seven lines and I just turned to granite." Kellerman continues, explaining that someone told her Altman was "really talented" and she should talk with him before rejecting the part. During her meeting with Altman, Kellerman said she angrily told him, "I'm not a WAC, I'm a woman! . . . Why does she have to leave the film so early? . . . Why couldn't she do this? . . . Why couldn't she do that?" To which, according to Kellerman, Altman replied, "Yeah. Why couldn't she? Why don't you take a chance? You could end up with something or nothing." (Zuckoff 169-170) And thus, Margaret "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan was cast and created; a creation not of a misogynistic, male director, but rather the product of collaboration between the director (male) and actor (female) striving to create a memorable female character in a male-dominated film about war.

This character, and the collaboration between Altman and Kellerman in creating "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan, clearly exemplifies Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and

heteroglossia at work in the film. In “Discourse in the Novel,” from *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin argues that the authorial speech that incorporates multiple “social voices” and a “wide variety of their links and interrelationships” leads to “social heteroglossia” (262). In *M*A*S*H*, social heteroglossia is created through the collaboration between Altman, Kellerman, and even with the audience, through their response to the character, however negative that response might be. Crucial to Bakhtin’s concept of a dialogic relationship is the acknowledgement that contested meanings and opposing perspectives on a referential object must exist. As Bakhtin writes in *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, dialogic relationships exist *between* these differing perspectives, and it is only through the embodiment in discourse of these oppositional views that true dialogic relationships are created (182-183).

Beyond the collaborative efforts behind the creation of this character, critics of the women in *M*A*S*H* also either carelessly overlook or deliberately exclude some obvious indications that O’Houlihan is a woman who should be admired, not ridiculed or scorned. Not only is she an intelligent and competent nurse, she is also a commissioned officer, a Major, who outranks the two doctors who harass and torment her throughout the film, Benjamin Franklin “Hawkeye” Pierce and “Trapper” John McIntyre, who are both Captains. Interestingly, the two leading male characters in the film who equal or exceed O’Houlihan in rank, Major Frank Burns and Lieutenant Colonel Henry Blake, are both portrayed negatively. Burns is depicted as an incompetent surgeon who lacks genuine compassion for both his patients and his colleagues, frequently blaming those of lesser rank for the mistakes he makes in the operating room, especially if the mistakes lead to the death of a patient. Blake is depicted as an ineffective leader who spends more

time in bed with his mistress than he does commanding the operations of his unit and fails to rein in the disruptive and degrading antics of Hawkeye, Trapper John, and Duke.

Although it is true that the women characters in *M*A*S*H* often experience the brunt of these antics, it is also true that the male characters in the film are just as likely to find themselves on the receiving end of the insults and pranks inflicted by this trio.

Furthermore, none of the characters in this film—not female *or* male—is presented in an entirely favorable light. They all represent stereotypes and caricatures to one degree or another, which might be atypical and unexpected in a conventional war film; but

Altman's *M*A*S*H* is not a conventional war film, it is a satirical comedy, at times bordering on parody.



Fig. 17. Major Margaret O'Houlihan Arrives at the 4077th. *From M*A*S*H.*

Sally Kellerman's "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan arrives at the 4077 M.A.S.H. unit and takes command of the nursing corps. She is depicted in the film as a commissioned officer and skilled surgical nurse who heads up the nursing corps in the unit. Pictured: Sally Kellerman as Major O'Houlihan and Roger Bowen as Lieutenant Colonel Blake

While much scholarly criticism of *M*A*S*H* has explored the depiction and treatment of women as being the object of men's sexual desires, it has failed to address the idea that the women characters are in control of their own sexuality. The awareness

that the women— not the men—control their own female sexuality is clearly obvious in the public broadcast of the private sexual encounter between Major Burns and Major O’Houlihan. During this encounter, O’Houlihan—*not* Burns—is the character who uses the phrase “hot lips” to refer to herself. Furthermore, even though others in the camp begin referring to Major O’Houlihan as “Hot Lips,” neither the use of the nickname nor the awareness that her private sexual encounter was made public affects her ability to perform her job as a commissioned officer or surgical nurse. In fact, it is Major Burns, the male character who is involved with O’Houlihan in the encounter that is broadcast for all to hear, who has an emotional breakdown and is taken away from camp in a straightjacket.

Another frequently cited example of the “problematic” depiction of women in this particular film is the scene in which Lieutenant “Dish” is persuaded to have sex with Captain “Painless” Waldowski. Waldowski is the camp dentist who is noted for his sexual prowess and as “the best endowed man” in camp; but following an unsuccessful sexual encounter, “Painless” questions his own sexual orientation and decides to commit suicide. Following an elaborate ritual, during which “Painless” is given a sleeping pill that he believes will kill him followed by a funeral procession after he falls asleep, Lieutenant “Dish” Schnieder is asked to “sacrifice” herself to save him. In other words, “Dish” is to get into bed with Captain “Painless” Waldowski and have sex with him so that his doubts about his own sexual prowess and orientation are eliminated, thereby saving his life. As the camera pans out and an orchestral version of the film’s theme song begins to play, the audience sees the bedsheet moving as “Dish” climbs into bed with the dentist.



Fig. 18. Lieutenant “Dish” Steps In to ‘Heal’ “Painless Pole” Waldowski. *From M*A*S*H.*

Maria “Dish” Schnieder cannot resist the urge to see for herself if Captain Waldowski is really the “best endowed man” in camp. Like the scene in the birth control clinic in *That Cold Day in the Park*, this scene—through its depiction of Lt. Dish’s curiosity about Waldowski’s physical characteristics—evokes the consciousness raising efforts of the Women’s Liberation Movement of the late 1960s. Pictured: Jo Ann Pflug as Lieutenant Maria “Dish” Schneider and John Schuck as Captain Waldowski



Fig. 19. A Smiling Lieutenant “Dish” Schneider Heads Back Home to the U.S. *From M*A*S*H.*

Following her night with “Painless,” a forgetful but smiling Lt. Schneider leaves camp to return home. Pictured: Jo Ann Pflug as Lt. Maria “Dish” Schneider

The concept that women are not merely the objects of men’s sexual desires but instead possess both their own desires and the power and ability to fulfill them is a subject that is explored frequently and from various angles in Altman’s films throughout the 1970s. While female sexuality is the primary focus in *That Cold Day in the Park* and

featured prominently in several storylines in *M*A*S*H*, the theme is less obvious and presented in an entirely different context in *Brewster McCloud* (1970). In the film, a fantasy incorporating elements of the Icarus myth, Altman seems primarily concerned with the conflict between the desire for individual freedom and the need for human relationships that bind us to one another. The leading character, Brewster McCloud, played by Bud Cort, lives alone in the underground tunnels and rooms of the Houston Astrodome and is isolated from the world in which he lives by his quest for flight. The film features obvious instances of gender role reversal: Brewster is a young virgin who is the object of female desire—he is protected by a guardian-angel-type older woman, Louise, who might also be the angel of death—and, he is warned to avoid sexual experimentation or activity as it will prevent him from achieving his goal of gaining flight. In other words, Brewster is a male who is encouraged to hold on to his virginity in spite of the two young women, Hope and Suzanne, who objectify and desire him rather than take advantage of the opportunities and females who avail themselves to him.

Rather than waiting for Brewster to recognize her lust for him, and act on the knowledge, Hope takes care of herself by frequently acting out her sexual desires for Brewster when she becomes excited or aroused in her day-to-day contact with him. This occurs in two separate scenes in the film and under differing circumstances. In the first scene, Hope has stopped by Brewster's living quarters beneath the Astrodome, and he is there when she visits. During this scene, Brewster undresses in front of Hope and begins doing chin-ups to strengthen his upper body, something he tells her is necessary if he is going to fly. As Brewster undresses, Hope becomes so excited that she begins

unbuttoning her dress. Brewster is oblivious to Hope's lust for him and her actions to fulfill that lust. The following sequence of scenes captures Hope's desire for Brewster:



Fig. 20. Hope Watches Brewster Doing Chin Ups in His Underwear and Gets Excited. *From Brewster McCloud.* Pictured: Jennifer Salt as Hope and Bud Cort as Brewster



Fig. 21. Hope Becomes Aroused and Begins Undressing with a Dreamy Smile. *From Brewster McCloud.* Pictured: Jennifer Salt as Hope



Fig. 22. Hope Wraps Herself in Brewster's Blanket. *From Brewster McCloud.*

Viewers hear Hope giggle and exclaim “Oh, Brewster!” several times as she remains wrapped in the blanket. Pictured: Jennifer Salt as Hope



Fig. 23. A Smiling Hope Emerges from Under the Blanket. *From Brewster McCloud.* Smiling and covered in sweat, Hope gazes at Brewster. Pictured: Jennifer Salt as Hope

A scene similar to this one plays out later in the film when Hope stops by Brewster’s “apartment” to drop off groceries from the health food store and she again undresses and retreats under Brewster’s blanket, without him. Unbeknownst to Hope, Louise is in the apartment and observes this ritual with bemusement. However, soon after this scene, Louise finds out that Brewster has lost his virginity to Suzanne, and an angry Louise abandons him. Louise, Brewster’s perceived “protector,” has visible scars on her back, suggesting wings were once present there. However, is she really Brewster’s guardian angel, or is she the angel of death? While none of the women in *Brewster McCloud* is the protagonist in the film, each plays a critical role in Brewster’s life while still asserting her own independence from him. In short, although the women characters care about and for Brewster, they are able to survive in the world without him; Brewster, on the other hand, crashes and dies when attempting to fly without Louise’s protection.

As discussed in Chapter One, female agency and sexual desire is explored—briefly but significantly—in one of the character arcs in *Nashville* (1975) when gospel singer Linnea Reese acts on her attraction to the womanizing Tom Frank, despite her

marriage to music promoter Delbert. While it might appear that Linnea, a seemingly naïve and inexperienced “older” woman, has become Tom’s latest conquest when she appears on screen in the singer’s hotel bed, the audience soon realizes she is the one who holds the power in the short-lived relationship. Some might take issue with the claim that Linnea holds the power in this scene, since Tom has already seduced, and abandoned, a number of other women in the film. Yet, it is Linnea who chooses when and how the encounter will end, even when Tom pleads with her to stay longer. In a 1977 interview for *The New York Times*, Altman tells Betty Jeffries Demby his intention in developing the relationship between the two characters was to create an element of surprise for audiences and to challenge their preconceived ideas about women and their relationships with men. In that interview, Altman states he wanted the audiences to say to themselves, “Oh, that poor woman, here’s that young boy taking advantage of her. When she doesn’t want to stay [with him], you see that he is the neurotic, he is the one with the problem. She got what she wanted” (16).

Pro-Sex Feminist Thought, Prostitution, and Altman’s 70s Films

Although some feminists, both during the 1970s and today, might take issue with the scenes from *Brewster McCloud* where Hope obviously fulfills her own sexual needs, or the scenes from *Nashville* depicting Linnea’s sexual encounter with the younger, more experienced Tom, an equal number—both during the 1970s and today—would defend these scenes as valid representations depicting female sexual freedom. While it would be nearly impossible to pinpoint the precise origin of the pro-sex attitude being expressed and celebrated by many American women in the 1970s, there is no doubt that the women’s liberation movement—with its emphasis on consciousness raising and

reproductive rights—helped advance the idea that women were entitled to “loving sexual partnerships” that did not require approval by the state or the church (Cobble et. at. 86).

However, the extent to which sexual freedom for women was accepted and the manner in which it could be publicly expressed or represented varied between different factions of the feminist movement. During the 1970s, one of the debates that began to take shape within the feminist movement concerned pornography, the sexualization of women in the media, and sex-trade work, particularly prostitution. The feminists defending these issues, who would eventually become known as “pro-sex” feminists, argued that pornography and the hypersexualized depictions of women were no more “dangerous or harmful to women than nonsexual media” or depictions of women in roles subservient or inferior to men (Cobble et. al. 122). Feminists who identified with the pro-sex side of the women’s liberation movement criticized what they considered to be a “stream of prudery” within the women’s movement and argued instead that women, like men, had a basic “human right to sexual pleasure” (122). Clearly, the depiction of Hope in *Brewster McCloud* supports this argument, regardless of whether or not Altman or any of the actors working on the film expressly make this claim. Further, the concept that women, like men, are entitled to the “human right to sexual pleasure” (122) is a concept that is explored in varying degrees in many of Altman’s 1970s films, such as *That Cold Day in the Park*, *M**A*S*H*, and *Nashville* to mention only a few.

Likewise, the theme of female sexuality and desire is evidenced in Altman’s films throughout the 1970s in various manifestations and degrees; and, it is an issue of primary concern—and as previously mentioned, contention—within the women’s liberation movement, or second wave feminism. Although the term “pro-sex” feminism had not yet been used when Altman’s *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971) was released, the phrase is an

appropriate descriptor for the film, which explores the contributions prostitutes made toward civilizing the American West and the men who attempt to conquer and settle it.⁷ According to Altman, it was the “whores [who] came along and made the men take baths, put on suits, and clean up. They said ‘You can drink in here, but you can’t come in drunk and start fights.’ Now you have the beginnings of [social] protocol” thanks to the whores (Demby 20).

Scholars and critics alike have routinely praised the ways in which *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* transformed the Western genre as a whole, citing the film’s realistic recreation of life in a 1900s Pacific Northwest mining town complete with saloons, poker games, and prostitutes, but featuring a kind of depth and detail never before seen in a conventional Western. Considered one of the director’s most critically acclaimed films, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* transcends the conventions of character depiction typically found in Western films, featuring cowboys who do not wear cowboy hats and prostitutes who actually look like the real women one might encounter anywhere in day-to-day life. In fact, the women working as prostitutes in McCabe’s and Constance Miller’s whorehouse are far from glamorous and are depicted wearing plain clothing and very little make up. Another notable difference in the way the whores are portrayed in conventional Westerns versus the way they are portrayed in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* can also be linked to feminist thought during the 1970s. That difference is the way Altman’s film also depicts the close relationships existing between the women working in the whorehouse.

⁷ In a 1977 interview published in *The New York Times*, Altman tells Betty Jefferies Demby one of the primary themes in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* is the “contribution of the prostitutes to the settling of the west,” noting “there were no other women out there. [Other women] couldn’t handle the hardships.”

In one sequence, the prostitutes are depicted bathing together after their arrival in Presbyterian Church. The scene is beautifully lit and filmed using a filter that creates a dream-like quality, and the women behave much like schoolgirls showering after gym class, giggling and teasing one another, moving between two huge steamy tubs of hot water before they all settle in one tub together, laughing and singing. The obvious playfulness and camaraderie shared between the women at Mrs. Miller's whorehouse give this bath scene a remarkably distinctive look and feel, which is especially notable when compared with "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan's shower scene in *M*A*S*H*, as the following screen capture illustrates.



Fig. 24. Bath Time at the Whorehouse. *From McCabe & Mrs. Miller.*

In another sequence, the prostitutes are depicted celebrating the birthday of one of the girls, who they have lured away from one of the men. There should be no question in the viewer's mind about the relationships that matter to the prostitutes: the relationships these women have with the men who pay them for sexual encounters is strictly business; however, the friendships they share with one another is genuine.



Fig. 25. Birthday party at the whorehouse. *From McCabe & Mrs. Miller.*

Scenes such as these, where the women are bathing together and are celebrating the birthday of one of the prostitutes together, clearly illustrate the idea that these women value their relationships with one another more than any relationship with a man. Further, these depictions of the closeness shared between the women are more reflective of 1970s feminist thought than it is of patriarchal attitudes toward women and sex. In the 1970s, “the women’s movement brought female friendship into a position of honor, not in second place after heterosexual dating and marriage” (Cobble et al. 90-91). Further, Constance Miller, the Madame who runs the whorehouse and protects the women who work there, is in one sense the stereotypical “whore with a heart of gold” (Altman, *Altman on Altman*, 60), but beyond that she is a savvy businesswoman with a keen awareness of what it takes to run a profitable whorehouse. It is Constance, not McCabe, who keeps track of all income and expenses and ensures the business is properly staffed, managed, and maintained. Further, although Constance does engage in a sexual relationship with McCabe, she considers it is a business arrangement whereby he pays her for her time and services.

Although not the primary themes in *California Split* (1974), Altman again explores in this film the ideas about prostitution and the “rightness” of a man paying for

sexual relations with a prostitute, and the importance of women's friendships among themselves. While the movie belongs to the buddy-film genre, the two male protagonists, Charlie and Bill, played by Elliott Gould and George Segal respectively, share a friendly and flirtatious relationship with two women who just happen to work as prostitutes in Los Angeles. These two women, Barbara and Susan, played by Ann Prentiss and Gwen Welles, are not only roommates, they also are very close friends with the slightly more worldly Barbara acting as protector toward Susan. In two different scenes featuring Susan, the exchange of money for sex is discussed with both men. In the first of the two scenes, Charlie and Susan are discussing their encounter the night before and he reveals he has paid Susan twenty dollars for their sexual encounter, and she responds by telling him her fee is thirty dollars. The second scene occurs later in the film when Susan tells Bill she really likes him and he does not need to pay her for sex. However, Bill's clumsiness when he tries undressing Susan leads to an awkward and embarrassing end to the encounter; and, Bill runs out of the women's house, his desire for Susan unfulfilled.

The women's relationship with one another is more natural and is explored through multiple scenes throughout the film, and the closeness of their friendship is clearly communicated to the audience. It should be noted that the women who are the prostitutes in these two films are not depicted in a powerless, pitiful manner; they are not forced to work in the sex trade to satisfy some male who arranges their schedule and takes a cut of their earnings for selling sex. Rather, they are presented as women who have made a *choice* to work in the sex trade, and their choice is respected, not belittled, within the context of these films.

Altman's *A Wedding* (1978) does not address the issue of prostitution; however, the film does consider female sexuality as belonging to the sphere of women, not men, and each individual woman is entitled to make her own decisions about her sexual encounters. This is illustrated in the characterization of Buffy Brenner, played by Mia Farrow, who discusses her sexual activity freely at her sister's wedding, claiming she cannot count the number of men she has had sex with and announcing her own pregnancy at the wedding reception—even though she herself is not married. Further illustrating this idea about women owning their own sexuality and the decisions surrounding it is the depiction of Tulip Brenner, the mother of the bride played by Carol Burnett, and her consideration of engaging in an extramarital affair with the groom's uncle, played by Pat McCormick. Whereas Buffy is clearly preoccupied with her own sexuality and freely engages in sexual encounters, Tulip takes the matter more seriously, struggling with the decision of whether or not to cheat on her husband, changing her mind multiple times. In the context of the film, however, both attitudes toward female sexuality are depicted as valid as they are the product of the two women's character and beliefs – their actions and morals are not the product of another person who is imposing them upon the women. These opposing ideas about female sexuality not only evoke a sense of feminism, they also reflect Bakhtin's concept of dialogism; whereby opposing ideas about the same referential object must exist before a dialogic relationship is established.

In addition to these contrasting depictions of Buffy and her mother Tulip, the film also features the wedding couple receiving a nude portrait of the bride, painted and gifted by the groom's eccentric, bohemian great aunt Bea. In a 1977 interview, recorded while he was working on *A Wedding*, Altman tells Betty Jeffries Demby he is intrigued “by the

mores men and women absorb—but particularly women” (12) from society, and he is interested in stripping them away. This use of female sexuality and nudity in a film that is ostensibly about the rituals and customs associated with American weddings seem to represent an attempt on Altman’s part to do just that. In addition, while feminists in the 1970s and 1980s might have been divided on the effects, these sexual depictions of women might have on the women’s rights movement, by the 1990s, more and more feminists embraced the “pro-sex” or “sex-positive” attitude demonstrated by Altman’s women in his 1970s films.

Altman’s Women Survive

One of the most significant and overarching themes found in Altman’s films throughout the 1970s is that women, no matter what circumstances life has dealt their way, manage to survive. This theme occurs in film after film, regardless of the film’s genre or the woman’s background and abilities. Simply put, the women survive. This theme of survival is most evident in the films critics have called Altman’s “women’s films,” most notably *Images* (1972) and *3 Women* (1977). *Images* tells the story of children’s writer Cathryn, who struggles with schizophrenia in what is perhaps Altman’s way of conveying the fragmented and contradictory lives women lead. In a 1977 interview, Altman addresses criticism of his films saying, “I can only paint things the way I see them. I don’t paint what I think should be; I paint what I don’t approve of” (Demby 1). According to Altman, society subjugates women, forcing them to develop disguises and learn to manipulate others just to survive (Demby 8). Altman specifically references Cathryn as an example of this, saying “she’s one of those women who don’t have to work or aren’t allowed [by their husbands] to work [outside the home] . . . so she

turns to [writing] children's stories just to occupy herself and becomes schizophrenic" (Demby 17). Cathryn's schizophrenia leads her to kill her husband in the final scenes of *Images*, yet she survives even through this experience.

An anecdote concerning the casting of *Images* highlights Altman's progressive views toward women at a time when working women were still fighting for workplace equality. Susannah York, who was cast to play the part of Cathryn, relates that soon after she was cast, she learned she was pregnant, went to Altman, and told him she would be unable to take the part because she was pregnant. According to York, and corroborated later by Altman, the director told her that was wonderful news, and there was no need for her to give up the part. He told her they would write her pregnancy into the script; her character Cathryn also would be pregnant. This hardly seems like a misogynistic response, giving further credence to the director's claim that he is not creating misogynist film worlds, but is merely showing us the misogyny that already exists in our world.

If scholars and critics agree on anything about Altman's body of work, it is that *3 Women* (1977) is undeniably a women's film in all respects. In his April 11, 1977 review of the film, the *New York Times*' Vincent Canby describes the film as "a contemplation of three stages in a woman's life by a man who appreciates women" ("Altman's *3 Women*" 11). The film bears Altman's stamp in every respect: he wrote the screenplay, and he produced and directed the movie. It is relevant to note here this film bears thematic connections to *That Cold Day in the Park* and *Images* in that all three films explore female agency and feature women as protagonists who navigate and survive in a complex world that, according to Altman and feminists alike, places extraordinary demands on women without offering them the same benefits and protections their male counterparts

receive. Because it is among Altman's most critically acclaimed films, much has been written about *3 Women* by scholars, film critics, and even fans of the movie; consequently, the discussion of this film will be limited here.

Like several of Altman's 1970s films already discussed in this chapter, *Thieves Like Us* (1974) also is an adaptation of an American novel. The novel *Thieves Like Us* was written and published by Edward Anderson during the depression era; and, it had been previously adapted for the screen as Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1949). The earlier film adaptation focuses almost entirely on developing the characters Bowie and Keechie and portraying their ensuing romance, which leads to marriage. In the earlier film, Bowie is portrayed with much more sentimentality than in Altman's *Thieves Like Us*, becoming a sympathetic anti-hero. In the later film by Altman, Bowie and T-Dub, his partner in crime, are likeable enough characters; however, in Altman's film adaptation, the audience is never encouraged to feel sentimental or sympathetic towards either of them. Not even Keechie, who seems to love Bowie in her own way, has any disillusionment about who or what her lover is. However, just as the character of Eileen Wade is spared in Altman's adaptation of *The Long Goodbye*, the director's adaptation of *Thieves Like Us* also spares Keechie. Although she could be said to be an accomplice after the fact in the bank robberies, Keechie never actually participates in the trio's crime spree; instead, she pleads with Bowie to give up his life of crime so the two might have a "normal" future together. Furthermore, in both the original novel and the earlier film adaptation, Keechie is gunned down in a police ambush along with Bowie in the closing scenes; but, in Altman's version, only Bowie is killed—Keechie survives.

In Keechie's final scenes of the film, she sits alone in a train station and strikes up a conversation with an unnamed woman sitting next to her, to whom she reveals that she is pregnant. Further, she tells the woman she thinks, "it'll be a boy," before quickly adding that if the baby *is* a boy, "he will sure not be named after his daddy, God rest his soul. He don't deserve to have no baby named after him" (*Thieves Like Us*). Our final glimpse of Keechie finds her walking to the train's boarding platform and a new life for herself and her unborn child. Although Keechie tried to save Bowie, his own efforts toward changing his life were too little and too late; Keechie, however, is a survivor.



Fig. 26. A Pregnant Keechie Leaves Mississippi for Good. *From Thieves Like Us.*

Holding her head high and looking straight ahead Keechie heads toward the train taking her to Texas after Bowie's death. Through the facial expressions and body language in this scene, the audience sees Keechie is not only looking toward the future, she is moving toward it as well. This conclusion to the film is different from the novel. In the novel, Keechi is killed with Bowie, but Altman's women are generally survivors, not victims. Pictured: Shelley Duvall as Keechie

Besides Linnea Reese, who has been discussed in Chapter One as well as earlier in this chapter, *Nashville* (1975) features several women characters with significant roles in the film, although all the characters and story arcs are not equally developed. Several of the women characters, besides Linnea, also have sexual encounters with the unscrupulous Tom Franks; his bandmate Mary, played by Cristina Raines; L.A. Joan,

played by Shelley Duvall; and, BBC reporter Opal, played by Geraldine Chapman. The only one of these encounters that is actually shown in *Nashville*, however, is the encounter with Mary, who is married to their other bandmate and seems quite smitten with Tom. It is this encounter between Mary and Tom that helps contextualize the encounter between Linnea and Tom, allowing audiences to contrast Linnea's actions with those of Mary. Linnea walks out on her terms; Mary, on the other hand, stays and is told by Tom to get out of his hotel room the next morning. These various scenes featuring Tom and his seduction of various women, as well as their differing responses to him, function to show that women also have sexual desires, and they have the freed will to *decide* to be the one in control of exercising them, when and if they so choose to exercise them.

The film also includes multiple storylines involving women characters who are singers or who want to become singers; two of the women singers are depicted as highly successful recording artists, while the other two are merely hoping to be discovered and thus have the chance to succeed in the country music industry. While the country music industry provides the backdrop for this film, it is not necessary to think of these women as singers or hopeful singers to understand their relationship to reality. Many women in all walks of life are continually trying to achieve success; some succeed, but others do not. What is interesting about these women singers is their characterization. Sueleen Gay, played by Gwen Welles, is depicted as a woman who has strong ambitions to become a successful singer, even though she cannot sing. Throughout the film, Sueleen is willing to do whatever it takes to break into the country music industry, even agreeing to do a striptease after being booed off the stage for her singing at a fundraising performance.

While one might view the scenes in which Sueleen agrees to strip as morally degrading to women, it is important to note that Sueleen *agrees* to do this because she wants the opportunity to make a name for herself in the entertainment industry. She is determined to be successful and is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve that success—a situation not unlike the contemporary entertainment industry. It is important to remember, Altman has said in multiple interviews that he strives to show things as they are, not as we wish them to be, and the depiction of Sueleen in *Nashville*, as well as the lengths to which she must go to “earn” a break in the music business, clearly illustrate the gender bias and exploitation of women that still exists in the entertainment industry.

In contrast to Sueleen’s often stated ambition and demonstrated determination to become a famous singer at any price, Albuquerque, played by Barbara Harris, merely talks of her troubled marriage and casually mentions her desire to become a singer. Her stage presence and ability to sing are unknown to the other characters in *Nashville* and to the film’s audience until she takes the stage in the final scene to render a gutsy, soulful version of the song, *It Don’t Worry Me*. Even though Albuquerque has no prior known experience on the stage, she engages the crowd and restores order from chaos, not only surviving, but also finally achieving the success she has been seeking, even if it might be short lived.



Fig. 27. Albuquerque Takes the Stage. *From Nashville.*

Following the assassination of America's Sweetheart and country music's legendary Barbara Jean, an unrehearsed and unprepared Albuquerque joins Linnea's gospel choir on stage and sings a moving, soul-filled version of *It Don't Worry Me*. Pictured: Barbara Harris as Albuquerque

The two singers who have already found success in the country music industry are more evenly matched in terms of talent than Sueleen and Albuquerque appear to be; however, there seem to be significant differences in the temperament of the two women. Connie White, played by Karen Black, is the more glamorous of the two established singers, although her music does not seem to have the substance or popularity that her rival's does. Her rival is Barbara Jean, played by Ronee Blakely, who is dubbed "America's Sweetheart" by her fans and others in the music industry suggesting she possesses a certain "loveable" nature. Clearly, between the two women, Barbara Jean puts more of herself into her music and gives more of herself to her public. Not surprisingly, it is Barbara Jean who has a mental breakdown on stage; and, it is Barbara Jean who is shot and killed by a deranged fan in the final scenes of the film. What does Altman want audiences to make of this assassination in the final scenes of *Nashville*? In repeated interviews, Altman has insisted his films are intended to show audiences the

truth about the way things are in the world,⁸ and when taken in context with his comments about women and the demands society places on them, the meaning seems clear. Barbara Jean is unable to handle the pressure of being “America’s Sweetheart,” which leads to her mental and emotional breakdown; and, because of her breakdown, she is no longer “America’s Sweetheart” and thus expendable—especially in a world such as Altman’s where women survive. However, Barbara Jean is the exception to this; she cannot survive – not the pressure and not the loss of her fans’ adoration. However, the other women characters in *Nashville* can and do survive – even the talentless Sueleen, and especially the gutsy Albuquerque.

Altman’s final feature film to be released in the 1970s, *A Perfect Couple* (1979), does not seem to fit neatly into any of the categories discussed in this section. While the film features several strong women characters, and is neither a buddy movie nor concerned primarily with its male characters, it does not seem to represent feminist ideology or even provide a woman’s perspective on the world. This is perhaps because the film is Altman’s attempt to recreate the success of *Nashville* in the form of a romantic comedy, and romantic comedies rarely present the world from a feminist perspective. Although Altman never claims the film is a satire or parody, there are some indications in the film’s text to suggest that the director might have intended the film to be a satire of the romantic comedy genre; but, the film never achieves the level of satire found *M*A*S*H*—in fact, it does not even come close.

⁸ Again, see for example *Altman on Altman* and or “Robert Altman Talks about His Life and His Art,” among many others that have been discussed in the introductory chapter and in earlier discussions of particular films.

With regard to the women in *A Perfect Couple*, the main female characters do represent creative, intelligent women to some degree; however, each one has a notable flaw or defect that would prevent her from being viewed as possessing complete agency. Sheila, the female half of the perfect couple and portrayed by stage actress Marta Heflin, sings with a popular music/performance group and is constantly bullied and intimidated by the band's male leader. She rarely speaks up for herself, and joins the video dating service because she feels her life is not complete without a partner. Eleousa, portrayed by Belita Moreno, is a concert cellist and the sister of Alex, the male lead in the film and the other half of the perfect couple. Although Eleousa is an adult and plays with the symphony orchestra, she still lives at home with her parents, where she obeys all her father's rules. Further, we learn early in the film that she has some sort of terminal illness and will likely not live much longer. Skye 147, portrayed by Ann Ryerson, is a veterinarian who serves as the foil to Sheila. She also is a member of the video dating service Sheila has joined. When trouble develops between Sheila and Alex, Alex returns to the dating service and arranges a date with Skye. The most problematic aspect of Skye's character seems to be her shallowness, although she does live alone and has no problem speaking up for herself – especially when it comes to her sexuality and physical desires. Clearly she is independent, intelligent, and resourceful, all characteristics which indicate she is a strong woman, so perhaps Skye's apparent shallowness is nothing more than the character's attempt to socialize with and relate to other people.

None of the characters ,women or men, in *A Perfect Couple* are adequately developed, so it is hard for audiences to identify with or care about them. Moreover, while the male characters in Altman's films are generally less complex than the women

characters, this is not the case in *A Perfect Couple*. By the end of the film, we have lost track of Skye; Eleousa is dead; and, Sheila has fallen head-over-heels in love with Alex, although there is no clear explanation in the film as to how and why this happened. Needless to say, critics and audiences alike shunned the film. Thus the 1970s, a decade that had opened with such acclaimed films as *M*A*S*H* and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, comes to a very disappointing close with *A Perfect Couple*.

CHAPTER V

“THERE IS SOMETHING SO DISTINCTLY FAMILIAR ABOUT YOU:”

EXAMINING THE WOMEN IN ROBERT ALTMAN’S FILMS – THE ’80s

“I make gloves, they sell shoes.”

– Robert Altman, on the difference between his films and conventional Hollywood movies

To understand one of the fundamental ways in which dialogism works in Robert Altman’s films, one must understand the director’s filmmaking methods and the degree to which his actors participated in the creation of the characters that appear on screen. In July 2009, actor Matthew Modine spoke in New York to the Hudson Union Society and discussed his most memorable experiences working in the film industry. During this talk, Modine relates the story of his experience working on *Streamers* (1983), the first film he made with Robert Altman. Modine, who plays Billy in the film adaptation of David Rabe’s stage production, explains that he had a big monologue in the film that he was nervous about as he was “very young at the time—twenty or twenty-one,” and this was “a big monologue, especially for a young actor.” Modine says he was so nervous, in fact, that he approached Altman on Monday morning, saying, “Mr. Altman, can I speak to you about that monologue?” According to Modine, Altman replied, “Oh God, are we shooting that today?” Modine says he told the director no, they are shooting the scene Friday, so Altman told him to wait and talk to him the next day about the monologue (Modine, “Robert Altman Schools Matthew Modine”).

Modine said he returned every day to ask Altman to talk to him about the scene, and always got the same response from the director, who said, “Talk to me tomorrow

about that.” Finally, on Friday, when they were preparing to shoot the scene with the monologue, Modine said he told Altman he really needed to speak to him *before* they shoot the monologue, but instead of letting Modine speak, Altman instead asks both Modine and the other actor in the scene what they plan to do when giving their monologues. After hearing their plans, Altman called the cameraman over and told him “We’re shooting Modine first.” The actor said he was very anxious about doing the monologue, and had become frustrated at this point because, “I’ve been begging him all week long to talk to me about this monologue, and he hasn’t spoken to me.” Modine said Altman filmed the scene immediately after that conversation, and they only shot three takes. After filming the scene, Modine said Altman noticed how upset he was and told him, “You see, kid, if I was interested in *my* interpretation of the role, I would play the role. That’s why I hired you” (Altman, qtd. in Modine, “Robert Altman Schools Matthew Modine”).

Many actors who have worked on Altman’s films tell similar stories about their experience working with the director. The freedom Altman gave actors to interpret and create characters, as well as dialogue, in his films is documented in countless interviews.¹ Further, this willingness by Altman to include the actors’ individual voices in the creative processes involved in filmmaking resulted in the production of films that are truly dialogic and polyphonic. Further, through the filmic “combining [of these] fully valid consciousnesses, together with their worlds,” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 21) Altman is able to

¹ See for example Zuckoff’s *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography*; Mann’s documentary film, *Altman*; Sterritt’s *Robert Altman: Interviews*; Emery’s *The Directors: Robert Altman*; as well as many individually published interviews with actors.

capture on film and preserve a multiplicity of views about American culture during the late twentieth century.

The 1980s: The Film Industry

By the early 1980s, the American New Wave movement in the film industry gave way to a more formulaic method of Hollywood movie making based on a new model: the high concept film. Where the Hollywood studio model relied on the star system to draw audiences into the movie theater, “high concept” films required a particular kind of plot—one that could be summarized simply and directly using only a few sentences. The high-concept film model² encouraged the production of movies that were more marketable to both pre-production financial backers and post-production viewing audiences, with the ultimate goal being to create the next Hollywood blockbuster. The phenomenal box office success of three films released in the 1970s provided the foundation for this shift away from the realistic and innovative films of the New Hollywood movement and toward the commercially successful high-concept movies: *Jaws* (1975), *Star Wars* (1977), and *Alien* (1979).

Ironically, two of the most influential New Hollywood directors, Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, respectively directed *Jaws* and *Star Wars*. Characteristics of the high-concept picture, or the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster, include a tightly structured plot, strong characters, a heroic or super-heroic character, sophisticated soundtracks, and technologically advanced special effects. There are many sources available that provide in-depth discussion of the elements and functions of the modern Hollywood blockbuster

² For more in-depth discussion of the modern Hollywood blockbuster, see Tim Dirks history of 1980s films on FilmSite.org, Stephen Prince’s *American Cinema of the 1980s: Themes and Variations*, Stephen Prince’s *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electric Rainbow*, or Robin Wood’s *Hollywood from Vietnam to Regan . . . and Beyond*.

film, and the brief description here is provided for critical contrast against the kind of film Altman created. Altman, always fighting against the established Hollywood code and methods, eschewed the “high concept film” model and refused to change his style of filmmaking. Consequently, none of Altman’s films from this period achieved the level of popularity or profitability reached by the high- concept films of the same period.

Backlash against Feminists and Feminism

While there is no identifiable end to the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s ³—the National Organization for Women as well as many other projects and organizations begun in the 1970s still exist today—feminism in general experienced significant changes during the 1980s, one of those being that the “women’s liberation movement” label fell out of common use. More importantly, though, the inauguration of President Ronald Reagan in 1981 marked the beginning of an attack on perceived liberalism and “progressive issues such as abortion rights, affirmative action, and the gay and lesbian movement” (Cobble et. al. 157). Further compounding this attack on feminism and feminist values by right-wing conservatives was the “belief that feminism was obsolete because gender equality had been achieved” (158), leading to the use of the term “postfeminism.” While those who believed equality had been achieved and used the term “postfeminism” to refer to the period and the lack of need for an organized feminist movement, others use the term to reference the ideological shift of feminism in the 1980s; and, still others use the term to reference the backlash against the feminist movement and feminism in general. In fact, as Ghent University’s Fien Adriaens writes

³ This is discussed in greater depth in Linda Gordon’s detailed history of the women’s liberation movement in her chapter of the same name, found in *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women’s Movements*, as well as in multiple other sources including the writings of Rebecca Walker.

in “Post Feminism in Popular Culture: A Potential for Critical Resistance?” there are “three dominant but divergent visions” of postfeminism, making it “one of the most contested notions” in feminist theory (1). It is onto this American cultural canvas of shifting ideology about women and women’s rights as well as the shift in moviemaking toward producing the next Hollywood blockbuster that Altman begins “painting”⁴ in the 1980s.

During the 1980s, Altman turned five adaptations of plays into feature films, all of which were original works of other authors and filmed outside the Hollywood production system. It is interesting, but perhaps only in an anecdotal way, that two of the 1980s filmed adaptations include only male characters: *Streamers* (1983) and *Secret Honor* (1984). Because there are no women in either of these two films, they will not be discussed further in this chapter. Three other films Altman directed and released in the mid-1980s also are adaptations of stage plays with screenplays adapted from works by other authors. *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982), *Fool for Love* (1985), and *Beyond Therapy* (1987) are adaptations of stage plays by Ed Graczyk, Sam Shepard, and Christopher Durang, respectively. In addition, while the women characters in those films warrant some discussion, the authorship of neither the films nor the characters can be wholly attributed to Altman.

It is also interesting, and perhaps only anecdotal, to note that all of these filmed adaptations were produced after Altman sold his production company, Lion’s Gate, and during his self-imposed exile from Hollywood. Following the decision by Twentieth

⁴ Altman frequently referred to himself as a painter when discussing his films in interviews, hence the painting metaphor seems appropriate. For examples, see *Altman on Altman*, *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography*, or “Robert Altman Talks about His Life and His Art.”

Century Fox to shelve Altman's *Health*, and the poor critical and box office response to *Popeye*, Altman decided to sell his production company and home in California, leaving the Hollywood movie scene and moving to New York where he began directing plays both on and off Broadway. Several of Altman's 1980s films were adaptations of productions he himself had already directed on stage, such as *Streamers*, *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean*, *Jimmy Dean*, and *Secret Honor*. With the exception of *Health*, all of Altman's 1980s films are adaptations of other literary works. However, because Altman reaccentuates these adaptations and incorporates the voices of the actors working in the films, they still display the Altmanesque style of storytelling and feature notable women characters. Table 3 identifies by name the major women characters in Altman's 1980s films and the actors who portrayed them.

Sexuality and Survivors: Altman's 1980s Women

Bridging the director's films of 1970s and 1980s is Altman's political satire, *Health*, the last film he made with Twentieth Century Fox. The movie was actually filmed in 1979, and Altman had planned for a 1980 release date to coincide with the U.S. presidential election that year. A change in management at Fox led to the film being shelved, although it was screened briefly in Los Angeles at several film festivals during the fall of 1980 (Zuckoff 335-336). The shelving of *Health* by Fox is detailed in both McGilligan's *Robert Altman: Jumping Off the Cliff* and Zuckoff's *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography*. The film was finally released by Altman himself in 1982 for a very limited run in New York City, and received mixed reviews. Vincent Canby, *The New York Times* film reviewer, labeled the film "a buoyant carnival of a movie" ("Robert Altman's Satire *Health*," 3) and said the film "by all conventional standards . . . is a mess

... but it is a glorious one” (4). Further, Canby is critical of the studio for labeling the film “unreleasable” (6) and shelving it.

Table 3

Major Female Characters in Altman’s 1980s Films

<u>Female Protagonists & Major Characters in Altman’s Films – 1980s</u>			
Character	Actor	Film	Year
Gloria Burbank	Carol Burnett	<i>HealtH</i>	1980
Isabella Garnell	Glenda Jackson	<i>HealtH</i>	1980
Esther Brill	Lauren Bacall	<i>HealtH</i>	1980
Willow Wertz	Diane Stilwell	<i>HealtH</i>	1980
Dr. Ruth Ann Jackie	Ann Ryerson	<i>HealtH</i>	1980
Olive Oyl	Shelley Duvall	<i>Popeye</i>	1980
Nana Oyl	Roberta Maxwell	<i>Popeye</i>	1980
Cherry, his Moll	Sharon Kinney	<i>Popeye</i>	1980
Mona	Sandy Dennis	<i>Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean</i>	1982
Sissy	Cher	<i>Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean</i>	1982
Joanne	Karen Black	<i>Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean</i>	1982
Juanita	Sudie Bond	<i>Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean</i>	1982
Stella Mae	Kathy Bates	<i>Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean</i>	1982
Elinore Schwab	Jane Curtin	<i>O.C. and Stiggs</i>	1985
Stella Stiggs	Carla Borelli	<i>O.C. and Stiggs</i>	1985
Michelle	Cynthia Nixon	<i>O.C. and Stiggs</i>	1985
May	Kim Basinger	<i>Fool for Love</i>	1985
Prudence	Julie Hagerty	<i>Beyond Therapy</i>	1987
Charlotte	Glenda Jackson	<i>Beyond Therapy</i>	1987
Zizi	Genevieve Page	<i>Beyond Therapy</i>	1987

Given its essential non-release, *HealtH* might seem to be a film that is not worth discussion here; however, the opposite is true. The film actually enhances critical understanding of the women characters in Altman’s films; and, it provides a bridge connecting the 1970s, the decade that fostered the film both creatively and intellectually, with the 1980s, the decade for which the film is intended and in which it finally is

released in very limited theaters. These decades are critical markers in Altman's career: the 1970s is his most prolific decade and produced his most critically acclaimed and commercially successful works. Conversely, the 1980s are considered the lowest point in Altman's career – both artistically and commercially. Like *Nashville* and most other Altman films, the finished “screenplay” for *Health* relies extensively on improvisation; and, like many Altman films from the 1970s, the film explores female sexuality and engages in consciousness raising in several of the major character arcs. It is quite possible, then, that Fox's shelving of the movie could be due in part to the presence of these thematic elements. Kirby Dick's documentary, *This Film is Not Yet Rated* discusses extensively the Hollywood film industry's bias against depicting female sexuality in a way that presents women as deriving pleasure from sexual relationships. While there are no sex scenes in *Health*, the women characters freely discuss their sexual experiences and the pleasure they have derived from these experiences.

While the film is ostensibly a political satire based on the 1950s presidential campaigns of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson, it should be noted that Altman created and cast these roles as women. Lauren Bacall portrays Esther Brill, who is intended to represent Eisenhower, and Glenda Jackson portrays Isabella Garnell who is intended to represent Stevenson. This gender reversal is noteworthy when considering Altman's attitude toward women in both society and in the film industry. Further, the extensive use of improvisation in *Health* allows the women working on the film to add their voices to the dialogism created in and by the film. In an interview for *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography*, Lauren Bacall tells Mitchell Zuckoff she “loved” the character and the movie, adding that “everyone who saw that movie adored it” (335). Of

Altman's work as a director, she said "He was filled with ideas . . . he made movies in his very own original way. If you wanted to try something, [he would say] go ahead and try it" (336).



Fig. 28. "Raise Your Hands for Purity!" *From Health.*

In *Health*, Lauren Bacall portrays 83-year-old Esther Brill, who is a candidate for president of a national health industry lobbying group. Brill attributes her long life and youthful beauty to the fact that she has *chosen* to remain a virgin.

In addition to giving voice to the women acting in the film, *Health* also revisits some of the women's issues that were part of the consciousness raising efforts of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Examples of this can be seen in the film when the women characters talk about female orgasm, breastfeeding, abortion, and women's physical health and wellbeing in general. Further, according to feminist thought, a woman's body and sexuality is her own, and Esther Brill's choice to abstain from sexual activity in order to focus on her own physical and mental health reinforces the idea that she—not anyone else—is in control of her body and her sexuality. Just as Esther Brill's choice to remain a virgin reinforces the idea that a woman has the right to determine her own sexuality, much of the dialogue spoken by characters in the film reinforce feminist ideas and Altman's own previously stated attitudes about women and society. For example, at one

point in the film, Glenda Jackson's Isabella Garnell says, "If we allow sex [meaning gender in the context of the scene] to compromise our objectives, then we compromise the wellbeing of all the people" (*HealtH*). Other 1980s films by Altman touch on some of the women's issues that were important to the consciousness raising efforts of the women's liberation movement of the 1970s, but none does so to the extent that *HealtH* incorporates them in the film's story or character arcs. The original screenplay for *HealtH* was written by Frank W. Barhydt, and Altman as well as actor Paul Dooley share writing credits for the film; it is the only completely original work among the director's 1980s films; and, again, it belongs—at least in part—to the 1970s.

Although *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean*, *Jimmy Dean* and *Fool for Love* are both adaptations of stage plays by other authors, the women characters in these films warrant some discussion, particularly with regards to aspects of the films that represent departures from the stage play. Altman's adaptation of Christopher Durang's *Beyond Therapy* also will be discussed, but in less detail and depth than the other two adaptations. Most of the film version of *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean*, *Jimmy Dean* remains faithful to the play from which it is adapted; however, filming the action—rather than performing it live on stage—allowed Altman to make creative decisions the stage production did not permit. As Altman explains when discussing the work, he had to use actors to portray the characters in "the mirror side" of the store for flashbacks in the stage production; however, in the film he was able to use Mylar mirrors thereby allowing the principal actors to portray their characters in both the past and present settings during the memory shifts.



Fig. 29. Mona, Sissy, and Joanne as the Maguire Sisters. *From Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean.*

This shot, as reflected in the Mylar mirror at the diner in the 5 & Dime, captures Sissy's request for "one last performance by the Maguire Sisters" in the final scene of *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* Pictured (L-R): Sandy Dennis as Mona, Cher as Sissy, and Karen Black as Joanne

The fact that Altman selected the play for production first on Broadway and then as a feature film adaptation is particularly significant given its nearly all-female cast and exploration of female sexuality and relationships. Further, the dialogic relationship created between the actors and the director clearly extends to the film's audience, as the film enjoyed moderate financial success in its release. Moreover, critics found *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* to be "a feature of perverse radiance, beautifully photographed . . . [in which] Altman performed interesting maneuvers with mirrors and an exquisitely detailed set" (McGilligan 524). Critics also were impressed with the film's "bedazzling performances" from the three leading actors: Cher as Sissy, Sandy Dennis as Mona, and Karen Black as Joanne. Cher, in fact, credits her performance in the film—and Altman for casting her in the part—with launching her career crossover from a singer and pop-culture icon to a serious film actor. "Without Bob I would have never had a film career," Cher told Mitchell Zuckoff (379).

Like *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*, Altman's shooting script for *Fool for Love*, as well as the final product on film, stays true to Sam Shepard's original play and screenplay. However, Altman explains he added his own interpretation of the play by choosing to "illustrate the monologues" thereby infusing the words being spoken with visual imagery not found in the play (*Altman on Altman* 140). In the film, Altman says he used the character's monologues as an opportunity to show flashbacks which "often contradict" what the characters are saying in the monologue. According to Altman, the film highlights the fact that the characters' "reality is an imaginary one, and when you hear what people say and then see it for yourself, you realize that [what they say] is not always the truth" (140). Shepard, however, takes issue with the changes Altman made in directing the film for the screen. "I think Bob did a commendable job. But in retrospect I don't think it works," (Zuckoff 391).

Critics responded favorably to the film, especially the casting and performance of Kim Basinger as May. Roger Ebert praised the film in his review for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, noting that Basinger's performance is central to the success of the film, and giving Altman credit for eliciting that performance. Of Basinger's May, Ebert said, "Nothing prepared me for the dimensions she was able to find in this one . . . Part of her impact probably is because the director is Altman. Few other major directors are more interested in women" (Zuckoff 390). Perhaps the most significant aspect of this film is the closing scene, which features a long tracking shot of May, portrayed by Kim Basinger, as she walks away from the burning hotel. While the revelations of the characters in the film have destroyed their lives and lead to the destruction of the physical space where these

lives converged, May, with suitcase in hand, walks away from the inferno because she—like most of Altman's women—is a survivor.



Fig. 30. May Walks Away from Everyone and Everything. *From Fool for Love.*

As their world constructed of lies and misrepresentations explodes, literally and figuratively, May walks away from the motor court where the characters have been living, leaving the past behind her. Pictured: Kim Bassinger as May

The Rest of Altman's 80s Adaptations

Altman's final 1980s filmed adaptation, the romantic comedy *Beyond Therapy*, was not well received by either critics or audiences. The screenplay was adapted for film by the original playwright, Christopher Durang; Altman made some revisions to the screenplay, adding one major female character as well as multiple minor characters who appear primarily in the background. Altman's most noteworthy addition to the screen version of *Beyond Therapy* is the addition of Zizi, the mother of one of the male characters. Further, the film certainly includes many of the Altmanesque features, including ostensibly strong women characters, a focus on female agency, and a concern with female sexuality and satisfaction. Still, on many levels, the film falls far short of Altman's best films, and the women characters somehow seem lacking. And while Altman takes a co-writing credit for his work on the screenplay, it seems he, too, is

detached from the work as the film is one he rarely discussed in interviews. In fact, Altman confesses to interviewer David Thompson that he was “not particularly” a fan of Durang’s play from which his film is adapted. Altman continues by noting that while “an audience of four hundred psychoanalysts laughed” frequently during a private screening of the film, they really “didn’t like it so much” (*Altman on Altman* 142). Again, while the film and the women characters in it bear some of Altman’s signature markings, they do little to advance Altman’s legacy as a director or women’s continuing struggle for equality in the film industry or the real world.

Although Durang’s play is intended as a farce, Altman’s film seems to blend, albeit unsuccessfully, farce and satire. As a result, the women characters come across as stereotypical depictions: Prudence, the female protagonist portrayed by Julie Hagerty, is a neurotic woman obsessed with finding a man; Charlotte, portrayed by Glenda Jackson, is a therapist treating Bruce and the mother of a gay male waiter who carries on a sexual relationship with the male therapist whose office is next door to hers; and, Zizi, portrayed by Genevieve Page, who is a melodramatic and overprotective mother who believes her son’s gay lover is cheating on him. However, the manner in which the characters are developed makes it difficult for audiences to relate to and care about them—just as the characters in Altman’s previous romantic comedy, *A Perfect Couple*. Consequently, as critic Vincent Canby notes, under “Altman’s wayward direction,” the intended farce becomes “a feature length blur” with “no special logic at work,” and the characters, who are “supposed to be funny,” are instead “utterly mysterious” (*Beyond Therapy* 8-9).

The films comprising the rest of Altman’s 1980s output also are adaptations of sorts, but they are not adapted from stage plays. The first of these “other” adaptations is

Popeye (1980), Altman's foray into family musicals. The film was adapted from cartoon characters created by Elzie Crisler Segar and first featured in the 1929 comic strip *Thimble Theatre*; the comic strips title was later changed to *Popeye* to reflect the popular character's starring role in the comic. The film, a coproduction of Paramount Pictures and Walt Disney Pictures and featuring a screenplay written by cartoonist and author Jules Feiffer, generated mixed reviews and disappointing box office numbers.⁵ It is this relatively poor reception of *Popeye* that ultimately leads Altman to leave Hollywood; thus beginning his self-imposed exile that lasts a little more than a decade.

Altman's most significant non-directing contributions to the film are his decision to cast Shelley Duvall as Olive Oyl and his decision to use many familiar Altman actors to fill the roles of background characters in the film. Paramount Pictures intended the film to star Dustin Hoffman and Lily Tomlin as Popeye and Olive Oyl, and Feiffer wrote the screenplay with those actors in mind. However, although he does not have a screenwriting credit for *Popeye*, Altman tells Thompson he worked with Feiffer on the story for the film after it was cast. Further, Altman claims the two of them, himself and Feiffer, "wanted to do more of the early Segar things" rather than the story presented in the later cartoons with which most people were familiar (120). With Duvall playing the part of Olive Oyl, the film definitely has an Altmanesque look and feel; however, due to the limitations of the source material as well as Feiffer's insistence that the actors stick to the script he had written, many of the typical Altman themes are excluded from the

⁵ According to *The Numbers*, *Popeye* generated revenue of \$49.8 million on a budget of \$20 million. While these numbers indicate a profit, they are nowhere near the blockbuster results expected by the studios participating in the production. By comparison, according to *Box Office Mojo*, 1977's *Star Wars* grossed \$460 million; 1978's *Grease* grossed \$188 million; 1978's *Superman* grossed \$134 million; and, 1980's *The Empire Strikes Back* grossed \$290 million.

Popeye. Further, the fact that the film was coproduced by Disney and intended to be a family musical meant that conventional representations of gender roles would be expected in the finished film.

It is worth noting, however, that Altman's background characters in *Popeye* occasionally lend a feminist perspective to the film, as in the scene in which Olive is literally singing Bluto's praises while her girlfriends offer a more realistic view of the character as the brutish, oppressive man he actually is. There are a few other memorable scenes in the film that depart from the source and seem to provide a more woman-centered view of the world that is typical in an Altman film, such as Olive's willingness to dive into the lagoon to save her baby, Sweet Pea. However, there are likely better examples of these types of scenes in the director's other works, and many of the characteristics Olive displays can be traced to the original *Thimble Theater* character.



Fig. 31. "He's Large." *From Popeye.*

While Olive Oyl sings the praises of her fiancé, Bluto, her girlfriends substitute Olive's praises with more accurate descriptions his brutish nature and giggle behind her back. Pictured: Shelley Duvall as Olive Oyl

Altman's *O.C. & Stiggs* (1985) was adapted from a feature in *National Lampoon* and based on characters created by Ted Mann and Todd Carroll. While the movie was filmed in 1983 on location in Arizona, it was not released until 1987. The characters

created by Mann and Carroll were inspired by the popularity of *Animal House* (1978), and their antics reflect the same disaffected-youth mindset found in the earlier film.

Although interviews with Altman for the 2005 DVD release of the film, included as a special feature on the disc, claim he intended *O.C. & Stiggs* to be a satire of then-popular teen movies, which is not the way the movie was marketed when it was released. If the movie is indeed a satire, as Altman claims, there is something to be said for the depiction of women in the film. At least, if the film is a satire, then the female characters become more significant *because* of the shallow, superficial, and negative stereotypical depictions they provide of 1980s women. For example, if the film *is* a satire, then Jane Curtin's depiction of Elinore Schwab as an alcoholic, oblivious, upper-middle class mother of teens would convey an entirely different meaning than it does if viewers perceive her character to be an "honest" reflection of 1980s motherhood. There are very few interviews from the 1980s or 1990s with Altman in which he discusses the film in depth or detail, so audiences are left to choose whether this film is a satire. Like the feminist movement of the 1980s, this film sends mixed signals about women in American culture.

Some Conclusions

Altman is not alone in sending mixed signals about women during the 1980s; mixed signals are plentiful in American culture during the decade due in part to the backlash against the women's liberation movement, as previously discussed. In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Susan Faludi claims the cultural backlash against feminism in the 1980s is the result of anxiety created by perceived progress by the 1970s women's liberation movement. To explain the way this backlash

works, Faludi describes women's progress as a "tilted corkscrew" and asserts that with each turn of the screw, resistance to the turning increases. In other words, the more progress women made toward achieving equality in American society, the greater the resistance by society toward allowing that equality (69). According to Faludi, this resistance manifested as a backlash against feminism that was disseminated and reinforced through all forms of American mass media, including television, cinema, advertising, and print and broadcast news, thereby creating a dialogic relationship between mass media and the American public.

According to Faludi, "backlash cinema" of the 1980s "embraces the *Pygmalion* tradition—men redefining women, [and] men reclaiming women as their possessions and property" (149), citing 1990's *Pretty Woman* as the ultimate example. Further, she notes many popular films replace women with men in the role of primary caretaker as if to illustrate that women are only needed to provide eggs for fertilization, citing films such as *Look Who's Talking* (1989), *3 Men and a Baby* (1987), and *3 Men and a Little Lady* (1990) as examples of this tendency. Further, according to Faludi, another group of backlash films "struggle to make motherhood as alluring as possible" (145) and divide "women into two camps: the humble women who procreate and their monied or careerist sisters who don't" (146). Examples of these films include *Baby Boom* (1987), *Parenthood* (1989), and *Overboard* (1987). Other films from the 1980s that feature themes rooted in the backlash against feminism and feminists include *Fatal Attraction* (1987), Woody Allen's *Another Woman* (1988), David Mamet's *House of Games* (1987), and countless others. When contrasted against these films, or the scores of 1980s action-adventure blockbusters that include women in only minor or supporting roles, Altman's

films from this period clearly provide a more realistic representation of women, even when the women are absent, as they are from *Streamers* and *Secret Honor*.

CHAPTER VI

“NEVER TAKE A GOOD WOMAN FOR GRANTED:”¹ EXAMINING THE WOMEN IN ALTMAN’S FILMS – THE 90s & 00s

“If I have a message, it’s not any profound truth. It’s this: ‘I am going to expose an event to you in such a way that you yourself will get a hunch that will tell you other things in your life experience.’” – Robert Altman, in a 1992 interview with Graham Fuller

“Mr. Altman is never condescending to the women, only somewhat fearful of their amazing power and persistence.” – Andrew Sarris, film critic

In *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin asserts that a genuinely polyphonic novel never represents a “single objective world” or authorial voice, but instead includes “a plurality of consciousnesses” which is capable of “standing *alongside* their creator” and disagreeing or even rebelling against that creator. (6-7). Altman’s films, with their ensemble casts, multiple plotlines and character arcs, multilayered soundtracks, and extensive use of improvisation create the filmic equivalent of Bakhtin’s polyphonic novel. Furthermore, Altman extends the polyphonic nature of his films beyond the celluloid frames through his insistence that actors develop their own interpretations of the characters they portray – rather than relying on instruction or direction from Altman. Moreover, Altman’s films not only are polyphonic in the sense that they include a plurality of fictional consciousnesses on the screen, but they are also polyphonic in the sense that a plurality of consciousnesses collaborates to create the films.

¹ Lines from *Dr. T & the Women*, spoken by Dr. Sullivan “Sully” Travis to his male friends when asked how he manages to maintain his sanity in a world filled with women.

The 1990s: The Film Industry

The movie industry in the 1990s was characterized by blockbusters, sequels, and unprecedented advancements in special effects and computer-generated imagery, or CGI. The high cost of special effects and CGI led to an increase in the average film budget to nearly \$53 million with many films coming in at more than \$100 million (FilmSite.org). With the exception of one film, *Home Alone* (1990), the ten top-grossing films of the decade all feature extensive use of special effects and or CGI.² Salaries and perks demanded by film stars also increased during the decade, further increasing the demand by studios for box-office success. The top-grossing film of the decade, James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), blends extensive use of special effects with conventional storytelling and capitalizes on the popular appeal of love stories and disaster movies. *Titanic* grossed nearly \$601 million in the U.S. alone and more than \$1.8 billion worldwide on a production budget of \$200 million. By comparison, Altman's top grossing film of the 1990s, *The Player*, grossed just \$21.7 million on a production budget of \$8 million, which seems more in line with the indie film market than major studio productions.

In contrast to the major studio blockbusters of the 1990s were the independent films arising from the art-house cinema of the mid-1980s and continuing through the 1990s. Where the typical Hollywood blockbuster of the 1990s relied on special effects and big budgets, the independent film was produced on a comparatively low budget. Further, independent films of the 1990s generally focused less on pure entertainment and

² Filmsite.org lists the top-grossing films – in descending order – of the 1990s as: *Titanic* (1997) - \$601 million, *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999) - \$431 million, *Jurassic Park* (1993) - \$357 million, *The Lion King* (1994) \$313 million, *Forrest Gump* (1994) - \$329 million, *Independence Day* (1996) - \$306 million, *The Sixth Sense* (1999) - \$293 million, *Home Alone* (1990) - \$285 million, *Men in Black* (1997) - \$250 million, and *Toy Story 2* (1999) - \$246 million.

more on serious subject matter. Notable indie films of the 1990s include *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and *The Usual Suspects* (1995). By the mid-1990s, indie films had become so popular that two independent film channels had been launched on cable television: The Independent Film Channel and the Sundance Channel. Further, the increasing popularity of indie films led major Hollywood studios to create their own independent film production companies, such as Fox Searchlight Pictures and Focus Features. By the end of the 1990s, the involvement by major studios in the indie film business resulted in independent films that more closely resembled major studio productions than movies by independent filmmakers.

Third Wave Feminism

The backlash against the feminist movement that occurred in the 1980s soon gave way to passivism, fostered by the belief among many young women that women had made astonishing gains in the last half of the twentieth century and feminism was no longer needed. However, as Astrid Henry notes in *Feminism Unfinished*, the televised Senate confirmation hearings for Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas provided “a wake- up call for why feminism was still urgently needed” (Cobble et al. 149). The Senate Judiciary Committee at the time of Thomas’s confirmation hearing was, like most of the Senate, all male and all white, and “the sight of these fourteen men debating the veracity of [Anita] Hill’s claims [of sexual harassment] . . . seemed to shake latent feminists out of their slumber” (Cobble et al. 149). As a response to the anger and outrage over the outcome of the Thomas hearings, *Ms. Magazine* published a special January 1992 edition addressing issues of race and gender equality. In this issue, Rebecca Walker, daughter of Alice Walker, published an essay detailing her feelings about the Thomas

hearings and invoking young women to take up the mantle of feminism. She closed her essay by declaring, “I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave” (Walker 13).

According to Henry, Walker’s activism and writing “argued for a feminism committed to being real” and to “acknowledge the full complexity and contradictions of people’s lives” (Cobble et al. 155). The Third Wave of Feminism then, reclaims a metaphor from the earlier days of the women’s rights movement. It is a wave of feminism and feminist thought that recognizes a broad range of concerns that extend beyond the boundaries of race, culture, and age and seeks to reclaim female roles and labels; including those that might be perceived as negative. Henry contends that, above all else, feminist ideology of this period “were grounded in three core principles.” These underlying principles required that feminism be polyvocal and acknowledge multiple perspectives; intersectional and acknowledge the interconnectedness of all social justice movements; and, “nondogmatic and acknowledge the complexities and contradictions of lived experience” (185). It is this broadened focus of Third Wave Feminism that begins to take hold in the early 1990s, when Robert Altman returns to Los Angeles and the Hollywood film industry.

Altman’s Return

Altman’s films during the 1990s represent a range of film genres, including a biopic, several crime thrillers, several dramatic comedies, and, of course, satires. The women characters in these films represent an increasingly diverse group of women in terms of their socio-economic status, professions, as well as their geographic location and place in time. Table 4 identifies by name the major women characters in Altman’s 1980s

films and the actors who portrayed them; most of these characters will be discussed in this section. Altman's female characters during the 1990s include film industry executives, lawyers, models, musicians, fashion designers, painters, gangsters, writers, mothers, performers, and even a phone sex prostitute—all of which seem to draw and expand on earlier characterizations of women in Altman's films. Moreover, while Altman's feature films of the 1990s still feature many intriguing women characters, there are noticeable differences between the women in these films and Altman's earlier works.

Although still present in the films of this period to some degree, the consciousness raising themes of the 1970s and the attention to female sexuality are not as prominent in the 1980s films. Instead, Altman's films from this period focus more attention on the women characters' concerns about careers, relationships, cultural traditions, and home and family life. This shift in the concerns of the women in Altman's films mirrors the shift in the national dialogue among women and about women's rights and concerns.

The Evolution of Altman's Women

Altman's first feature film of the decade, *Vincent & Theo* (1990) was originally filmed in 1989 as a four-part special television production for the British Broadcasting Company. While the film is a biopic of artist Vincent van Gogh and his brother Theo, it addresses two of feminism's most pressing concerns: one being the willingness of women to do whatever necessary to provide for their families, and the other being the necessity of women to develop both public and private identities. These concerns are beautifully illustrated in the character of Sien Hoornik, portrayed by Jip Wijngaarden, the model who lived with Van Gogh for about two years. In the film, Sien is a mother and the sole provider and caretaker for her young daughter; and, before agreeing to move in with Van

Gogh and become his model, Sien works as a seamstress and prostitute to support her daughter. Sien agrees to the modeling and living arrangement with Van Gogh because he provides food and shelter for her daughter and for her.

Table 4

Major Female Characters in Altman's 1990s Films

<u>Female Protagonists & Major Characters in Altman's Films – 1990s</u>			
Character	Actor	Film	Year
Sien Hoornik	Jip Wijngaarden	<i>Vincent & Theo</i>	1990
June Gudmundsdottir	Greta Scacchi	<i>The Player</i>	1992
Bonnie Sherow	Cynthia Stevenson	<i>The Player</i>	1992
Detective Avery	Whoopi Goldberg	<i>The Player</i>	1992
Celia	Dina Merrill	<i>The Player</i>	1992
Ann Finnigan	Andie MacDowell	<i>Short Cuts</i>	1993
Marian Wyman	Julianne Moore	<i>Short Cuts</i>	1993
Claire Kane	Anne Archer	<i>Short Cuts</i>	1993
Lois Kaiser	Jennifer Jason Leigh	<i>Short Cuts</i>	1993
Doreen Piggott	Lily Tomlin	<i>Short Cuts</i>	1993
Betty Weathers	Frances McDormand	<i>Short Cuts</i>	1993
Zoe Trainer	Lori Singer	<i>Short Cuts</i>	1993
Isabella de la Fontaine	Sophia Loren	<i>Prêt-à-Porter</i>	1994
Kitty Potter	Kim Basinger	<i>Prêt-à-Porter</i>	1994
Simone Lowenthal	Anouk Aimee	<i>Prêt-à-Porter</i>	1994
Anne Eisenhower	Julia Roberts	<i>Prêt-à-Porter</i>	1994
Slim Chrysler	Lauren Bacall	<i>Prêt-à-Porter</i>	1994
Regina Krumm	Linda Hunt	<i>Prêt-à-Porter</i>	1994
Blondie O'Hara	Jennifer Jason Leigh	<i>Kansas City</i>	1996
Caroline Stilton	Miranda Richardson	<i>Kansas City</i>	1996
Babe Flynn	Brooke Smith	<i>Kansas City</i>	1996
Nettie Bolt	Jane Adams	<i>Kansas City</i>	1996
Mallory Doss	Embeth Davidtz	<i>The Gingerbread</i>	1998
Lois Harlan	Daryl Hannah	<i>The Gingerbread</i>	1998
Konnie Dugan	Troy Byer	<i>The Gingerbread</i>	1998
Camille Dixon	Glenn Close	<i>Cookie's Fortune</i>	1999
Cora Duvall	Julianne Moore	<i>Cookie's Fortune</i>	1999
Emma Duvall	Liv Tyler	<i>Cookie's Fortune</i>	1999
Jewel "Cookie" Orcutt	Patricia Neal	<i>Cookie's Fortune</i>	1999

In one of the most memorable scenes between Van Gogh and Sien, she notices him sketching while she is sitting on the pot and asks him, "Are you drawing me?" When

Vincent, portrayed by Tim Roth, replies “Yes,” Sien scolds him (*Vincent & Theo*). While this scene is tame when compared with scenes from Altman’s earlier films, it is certainly reflective of the challenge “real” women face in balancing personal and professional lives. This scene clearly illustrates that Altman “hears” the conversations and dialogues of real women and recreates in his art one of the most important challenges they face in the 1990s and still today. Furthermore, the scene demonstrates the degree to which Sien, not Vincent Van Gogh, controls the boundaries in the personal and business relationships the two characters share with one another. Clearly, Sien is the one who sets and enforces these boundaries, not Van Gogh.



Fig. 32. You Are Not Allowed to Draw Me! *From Vincent & Theo.*

Upon realizing that he is drawing her in a very intimate moment, Sien tells him, “You can draw me if I am modeling . . . not if I am myself!” (*Vincent & Theo*). Pictured: Jip Wijngaarden as Sien Hoornik

The original production was released as a mini-series for European television; a re-edited version of the film opened in the United States in November 1990 in a very limited release, playing in only fifty-nine theaters during its run (“Vincent and Theo,” *Box Office Mojo*). Critics praised the film for its artful style and authentic representation

of the relationship between Van Gogh and his brother as well as the intimate nature in which it portrays the artist. The favorable critical response to the film played a crucial role in Altman's return to Hollywood, as David Thompson notes. "Until *Vincent & Theo* brought Altman fully back into the game, projects in America had continued to prove elusive" for the director (150).

Many of Altman's films released after his return to the U.S. seem more conventional than his earlier work; and, while they feature many interesting and strong women characters, the depiction of these women is not as controversial as those in Altman's films of the 1970s. Perhaps this is due to the changing dialogue in American culture about feminism and women's roles; or, perhaps it is due to the director's own desire to work in the Hollywood film industry again. As Altman tells the story, he had already returned from France and had begun working on his next project, tentatively titled *L.A. Short Cuts*, which was adapted from Raymond Carver's short story collection, *Short Cuts*. According to Altman, that screenplay was written and most major parts had been cast when he received an offer to direct 1992's *The Player*, which he said, "was a really dreadful script." As Altman tells the story, he did not really want to direct the film but finally agreed to terms (Thompson 150). Producer David Brown tells the story in a slightly different manner:

At some point Bob Altman called me and said, "You own a property I was born to direct, *The Player*."

I said, "Bob, I agree you were born to direct this, but you have to be a good boy and play ball."

He said, "I will." (Zuckoff 406)

Still, a third version of the story of how Altman came to direct *The Player* comes from writer Stephen Cole in an article appearing in the October 16, 1993, edition of the *Globe and Mail*. In that article, Cole claims that Sidney Lumet had been in negotiations with the producer to direct the movie, but that Lumet had wanted too much money. Then, according to Cole, “hungry for work, Robert Altman begged for a chance to direct a film he felt born to make, offering his services” for much less than Lumet’s asking price had been (Zuckoff 407).

While these differing anecdotes might not seem important, *if* there is some truth to the version of events related by Brown and Cole, that Altman really did want to direct *The Player*, then it is quite possible the director known for his arguments with studios and writers and for insisting to make movies his way, might agree to “play ball” with the producer and writer to direct the film. Regardless of the contradictory versions about how Altman came to direct *The Player* (1992), he does end up directing the film and winning the best director prize at the 1992 Cannes Film Festival for his work, as well as an Academy Award nomination in the same category. Furthermore, the film was well received by critics and audiences alike. According to Altman, “the scathing satire about Hollywood . . . enabled him, finally, to work on the projects that have obsessed him for years but proved elusive because [studios] found his work too risky and . . . uncommercial” (Zuckoff 423).

Two of Altman’s films from the 1990s feature male protagonists: *The Player* (1992), starring Tim Robbins in the leading role, and *The Gingerbread Man* (1998), starring Kenneth Branagh. These films both feature female characters depicting a variety of societal roles; they are studio executives, painters, lawyers, mothers, and even

potential killers. However, since each of these films primarily focuses on its male protagonist, the women characters will not be analyzed or discussed in this chapter.

As previously mentioned, while Altman's films from the 1990s still feature distinctly Altmanesque elements and characters, the focus on these characters has shifted. Like Sien in *Vincent & Theo*, it seems these women are—metaphorically—saying to the director, “You can only film me if I am acting—not if I am being myself.” More specifically, it seems the women characters are filmed and photographed as they fulfill their public roles in their respective filmic worlds, but their private worlds have become—to a large degree—off limits. It is interesting here to remember that as a filmmaker, Altman captures on film lives in motion, exploring the actions and relationships between characters, not the underlying themes or ideas that might motivate them to act. Further, the dialogue of the women's liberation movement with its emphasis on consciousness raising has long since been replaced by either silence, resulting from the backlash against feminists in the 1980s, or acceptance, resulting from the Third Wave of feminists who seek to broaden the scope of women's worlds and concerns.

Because many of Altman's women characters in his 1990s films draw on earlier depictions of women that have already been discussed, not all warrant further individual analysis and discussion; however, there are some notable exceptions and variations among these characters. While *Short Cuts* (1993) is filled with women characters representing a vast range of socio-economic classes and professions—artists, musicians, waitresses, and others—it is perhaps Jennifer Jason Leigh's Lois that stands out among them all. Fiercely independent and determined to help provide for her family, Lois works as a phone-sex operator to supplement her husband, Jerry's, income as swimming pool

cleaner. And while some might find Lois' "profession" demeaning, she is clearly presented as the most responsible partner in their marriage. Further, she repeatedly stresses to her husband Jerry and to friends that she not only does *not* find the phone calls sexually stimulating, but she often finds the calls and the men who make them repulsive. When relating one of the calls to her friend Honey, Lois tells her it was particularly repulsive because the caller was a known church official who asked her to assume the persona of a four-year-old child. When Honey responds with utter disgust, as might be expected, Lois justifies her work by telling her friend, "At least I'm keeping 'em off the streets" (*Short Cuts*).



Fig. 33. Lois Kaiser Reads a Magazine While "on the Job." *From Short Cuts.*

In *Short Cuts*, Jennifer Jason Leigh's character reveals her casual, disinterested attitude toward the calls she makes selling sex on the phone. In this shot, she is reading a magazine while attempting to clip her toenails while convincing the man she is talking to that he is really arousing her sexually.

There are additional scenes in the film that clearly illustrate that in this filmic world, the women characters are more admirable than the men. Another notable example concerns the scene where Lois's husband Jerry along with his friends Bill and Stuart, find the nude body of a young woman floating in the water where they have gone to fish. Rather than report the find to the police immediately, the men tie the body to rocks along

the bank and continue fishing, waiting several days until their fishing trip is finished before reporting the body to the police. When the men return home, Stuart relates the incident to his wife, Claire, who is not only disgusted by the men's actions; but she also feels guilty that her husband and his friends treated the dead woman's corpse in such a heartless manner. The next day, in an attempt to ease her guilt and remorse, she visits the funeral home where the young woman's funeral is to be held.

The contextual justification of the depiction of several women in the film, such as the aforementioned Lois and Claire, allows audiences to see these women in a realistic light – one that acknowledges they must carve out their own existence in a world that is dominated and controlled by the men in their lives. This is also the case in the depiction of the character Marian Wyman, portrayed by Julianne Moore. In one of the more memorable scenes in the film, and one that is frequently mentioned as proof of the director's misogynistic attitude toward women, Marian is being aggressively questioned by her husband, Dr. Ralph Wyman, about why so many of her paintings feature people in the nude. This questioning increases Ralph's aggression toward his wife and leads him to bring us a past experience that he believes proves she was unfaithful to him. While the couple is talking, Marian spills wine on her white skirt then removes it to clean the spot because she does not want to change outfits. Upon seeing her nude from the waist down, Marian's husband is further outraged that she is not wearing underwear, and his questioning becomes outrageous and emotional as he demands she tell him the truth about that incident from the past that he believes proves her infidelity. Eventually, Marian tells Ralph the truth about the night in question, revealing that the mutual friend her husband is asking about did indeed have sex with her while both of them were

extremely intoxicated. In many respects, this scene clearly illustrates the extent to which American men have always sought to control a woman's sexuality, no matter what her relationship is to the men or man in question. In Marian's case, it is not just her husband who seeks to control her sexuality, it is also the male friend who takes advantage of the situation when she is too drunk to consent to, or refuse, the sexual encounter.



Fig. 34. Dr. Ralph Wyman Angrily Questions His Wife. *From Short Cuts.*



Fig. 35. Marian Wyman Responds. *From Short Cuts.*

As these shots illustrate, the male character is clearly the more emotional and irrational of the characters in this scene. Pictured: Matthew Modine as Ralph Wyman and Julianne Moore as Marian Wyman

Many critics and moviegoers at the time expressed concerns about Altman's inclusion of sex, nudity, and infidelity in *Short Cuts*—especially the scenes where the men find the dead woman's nude body in the water, and the scene where Marian, portrayed by Julianne Moore, appears nude from the waist down—claiming those things

were not in Carver's original stories. Altman defends his writing and directorial choices, arguing, "It's not my business—nor was it Carver's business—to moralize about these things. I resent in art the [existence of a] definitive explanation for people's behavior—there isn't any" (Zuckoff 428).

Altman's *Kansas City* (1996) is notable for not only its nostalgic set design and rich jazz score, but it is also notable for the two protagonists, which happen to be women. Jennifer Jason Leigh, whose father Altman had directed in the television series *Combat!*, portrays the villain in the film, Blondie O'Hara, a character Altman had long wanted to create on film. Miranda Richardson portrays Carolyn Stilton, the woman Blondie kidnaps and holds hostage to ensure the safe release of her small-time gangster husband who has stolen money from the wealthy business associate of the local gangster and jazz club owner, Seldom Seen. The women characters in this film are both strong, although Richardson's Carolyn does not find her strength until the end of the film when she finally kills Blondie. The film is notable in that Blondie's character arc features several gender role reversals: first, her depictions as a woman "gangster;" second, that her husband has been taken hostage and she must confront the men who have taken him; and, third, that she commits a crime by kidnapping the wife of the man she believes can ensure her husband's safe return. Unfortunately, the story does not play out that way, and Miranda Richardson's character calmly shoots and kills Blondie in the final scenes of the film.



Fig. 36. Blondie Kidnaps “Red.” *From Kansas City.*

As the villain in *Kansas City*, Blondie enters the home of Carolyn Stilton, who she calls “Red,” and takes her hostage to try and win the release of her husband who has been taken hostage after robbing an associate of crime boss Seldom Seen. Pictured: Miranda Richardson as Carolyn and Jennifer Jason Leigh as Blondie

Two of Altman’s 1990s films, *Prêt-à-Porter* (*Ready to Wear*) (1994) and *Cookie’s Fortune* (1999), feature predominantly female casts. *Prêt-à-Porter* is a satire/parody of the fashion industry filmed in France during fashion week. It features a mixture of fictional characters interacting with actors and models portraying themselves; therefore, meaningful character analysis is nearly impossible. It is worth noting, however, that Altman’s choice to make a film about the women’s industry—albeit, a poorly received satire—is consistent with his interest in women, their interests, and their lives. Altman’s *Cookie’s Fortune* (1999) is based on the idea for a short story screenwriter Anne Rapp had been working on about an elderly widow whose health is declining and who misses her husband and decides to commit suicide. Rapp had sent Altman some of her work, and he had hired her to work on a script for him. Eventually, the script she wrote for Altman became the screenplay *Cookie’s Fortune*, which is based on her ideas for the story about the elderly woman who kills herself. The film’s cast is predominantly

female, with most male characters playing supporting roles. Set in Holly Springs, Mississippi, the film is in many respects a typical southern comedy/drama; however, it does bear distinctive Altmanesque features, such as the ensemble cast with women filling the most important roles, the use of tracking shots, and—of course—overlapping dialogue. The film was well received by critics, but even with Glenn Close in the leading role, it was not a box office hit.

The 2000s in Film and Feminism

Perhaps nothing affected the film industry or the feminist movement more than the proliferation of the Internet, a trend that had begun in the mid-1990s. In the film industry, the early 2000s saw DVD sales surpass VHS sales, and the implementation of the first online site for legally watching feature films. The site, *MovieLink*, was a joint venture of five major Hollywood studios. The moviemaking trend toward creating blockbusters using special effects and requiring big budgets continued, with special effects becoming more sophisticated and film budgets increasing exponentially. Likewise, technology and the Internet had a tremendous impact on the feminist movement as it became “the primary means by which feminist ideas have circulated and feminist actions have been organized” (Cobble et. al. 176).

Altman’s Final Films

Despite having a heart transplant in 1996, Altman continued working until his death, from leukemia, in November of 2006. His final four films could easily be considered “women’s films” due to the large cast of women actors and film industry professionals working on them, and for the manner in which they continue addressing issues that are of importance to women. None of the films was a box-office hit. Again,

the women characters in these films draw on the earlier women created in Altman's films, and the scenes created in the films evoke memories and images of the director's earlier works and illustrate the dialogic nature of the director's body of work. Table 5 identifies the major female characters in Altman's final films.

Table 5

Major Female Characters in Altman's 2000s Films

<u>Female Protagonists & Major Characters in Altman's Films – 2000s</u>			
Character	Actor	Film	Year
Bree	Helen Hunt	<i>Dr. T & the Women</i>	2000
Kate	Farrah Fawcett	<i>Dr. T & the Women</i>	2000
Peggy	Laura Dern	<i>Dr. T & the Women</i>	2000
Carolyn	Shelley Long	<i>Dr. T & the Women</i>	2000
Connie	Tara Reid	<i>Dr. T & the Women</i>	2000
Dee Dee	Kate Hudson	<i>Dr. T & the Women</i>	2000
Marilyn	Liv Tyler	<i>Dr. T & the Women</i>	2000
Constance Trentham	Maggie Smith	<i>Gosford Park</i>	2001
Sylvia McCordle	Kristin Scott Thomas	<i>Gosford Park</i>	2001
Mary Maceachran	Kelly Macdonald	<i>Gosford Park</i>	2001
Mrs. Wilson	Helen Mirren	<i>Gosford Park</i>	2001
Mrs. Croft	Eileen Atkins	<i>Gosford Park</i>	2001
Elsie	Emily Watson	<i>Gosford Park</i>	2001
Loretta "Ry" Ryan	Neve Campbell	<i>The Company</i>	2003
Lola Johnson	Lindsay Lohan	<i>A Prairie Home</i>	2006
Yolanda Johnson	Meryl Streep	<i>A Prairie Home</i>	2006
Rhonda Johnson	Lily Tomlin	<i>A Prairie Home</i>	2006
Dangerous Woman	Virginia Madsen	<i>A Prairie Home</i>	2006

It seems only fitting that Altman would open his final decade of filmmaking with a controversial entry. When Altman's *Dr. T & the Women* (2000) was released, in received a CinemaScore rating of "F" indicating that audiences had an extremely negative reaction to the film. In the film, Richard Gere portrays Dr. Sullivan Travis—"Dr. T" to his beloved patients—a gynecologist treating Dallas' wealthiest women. The film includes a cast comprising many notable women actors and tells the story of a

compassionate doctor and his non-sexual relationships with his patients. CinemaScore, created in 1978 by research analyst Harold Mintz, aims to provide “unbiased measurement of audience response . . . by polling movie audiences on opening night for their reaction” (*CinemaScore.com*). In an interview with Kevin Lincoln of *Vulture*, Mintz explains the CinemaScore method of polling audiences as they exit theaters and compiling the individual audience members’ scores using an algorithm developed by his firm for just that purpose. Although Mintz will not divulge the specific formula used to calculate a movie’s A through F letter rating, he does admit that the “grades” assigned by audiences are not equal, and that the greater the number of lower scores a film receives, the worse the effect is on the overall CinemaScore grade for that film. Further, he says there are more movies that receive an A rating from CinemaScore than there are movies that receive an F rating, explaining that horror movies are the most likely genre of movies to be given an F rating.

Critical response to *Dr. T & the Women* was mixed, with many calling the film misogynistic and the female characters shallow and stereotypical. In her review for *Film.com*, critic Elizabeth Weitzman writes “Without exception, every one of Dr. T’s—and thus Altman’s—women is either neurotic, needy, naked, or a lesbian. In other words, either a male fantasy or a male fear” (*RottenTomatoes.com*). Conversely, critic Roger Ebert rated the film three out of four stars and notes the similarities between Altman and the fictional Dr. T. Ebert, “Altman . . . surrounds himself with women as writers, producers, and colleagues. At a time when most movies have no interesting roles for women, actresses seek his sets like the promised land” (3). While it might seem Elizabeth Weitzman’s criticism of the film might hold more credibility than others, since she is—

after all—a female, her assessment of the film’s female characters is inaccurate. Bree, portrayed by Helen Hunt, is a former professional golfer who is working as the golf pro at a local country club when she meets Dr. T, or Sully as she calls him. She is neither needy, neurotic, nor naked in the film; further, she is not dependent on Sully Thompson for anything. Like many of Altman’s women, she holds the power in her relationship with Sully, while it is the male who is needy and seems neurotic. Following the cancellation of his daughter’s wedding, Sully hops in his classic Cadillac convertible and drives through pounding rain—with the top down, no less—to get to Bree’s home. When he arrives, he runs quickly upstairs to her, declaring he loves and needs her and begging her to run away with him. Sully tells Bree, “I’ll take care of you. You’ll never have to work or worry about anything again!” Bree looks at him with confusion and astonishment, asking him, “Why would I want that?” (*Dr. T & the Women*). Furthermore, as previously discussed, the film’s screenplay was written by a woman, Ann Rapp, not Robert Altman; and, with the director’s history of insisting that actors perform their roles using their own interpretations of the characters, the women characters cannot be completely the creations of the director; they are a creation of the dialogic relationship that exists between Altman, the actors, and the audience.



Fig. 37. “Why Would I Want That?” *From Dr. T & the Women.*

Begging Bree to run away with him Dr. T, Sully Travis, promises her she will never have to worry about anything again because he will take complete care of her. She looks at him and asks, “Why would I want *that*?” Pictured: Helen Hunt and Richard Gere

Like *Dr. T & the Women*, both *Gosford Park* (2001) and *The Company* (2003) also include large ensemble casts, but both films feature female protagonists. *The Company* is especially noteworthy as it tells the story of a contemporary ballet company, the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago, over the course of a year as it rehearses and presents various ballet productions. The story and screenplay were created by Neve Campbell who trained as a classical ballet dancer and personally selected Altman to direct the film, even though he had no experience with dance movies. *The Company* further distinguishes itself from other dance films in that its primary focus is on the successful female dancers who choose to dance rather than marry and have children. Further, in another conventional gender role reversal, it is the male characters in this film who are presented as temperamental and moody. Neve Campbell said of the film, “I love that it’s a Robert Altman film. I love that it doesn’t tell you what to think and feel . . . It’s exactly what I envisioned and exactly what I wanted” (Zuckoff 481).

Altman's final feature film *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006) is an adaptation of Garrison Keillor's text, and the writer is featured in the film as GK. As previously discussed, albeit briefly, in Chapter One, this film features several Altmanesque elements, particularly the emphasis on the women characters as the wise problem solvers. Facing the imminent closure of the theatre where their radio show is recorded, Yolanda and Rhonda meet at the diner and collaborate to produce a show that will save the theater from closure.

In Ron Mann's documentary *Altman* (2014), Kathryn Altman says of her husband's work on *A Prairie Home Companion*, "He was doing two things: returning to his childhood and his love of the radio and contemplating death." Indeed, it seems the director was contemplating death—at least in a filmic sense. In the film's closing scenes set in the diner, the main characters are sitting in a booth discussing the success of their plan to save the theater and planning their next production when Virginia Madsen, as the angel of death who appears earlier in the film to claim one of the radio show's regulars, enters the diner.

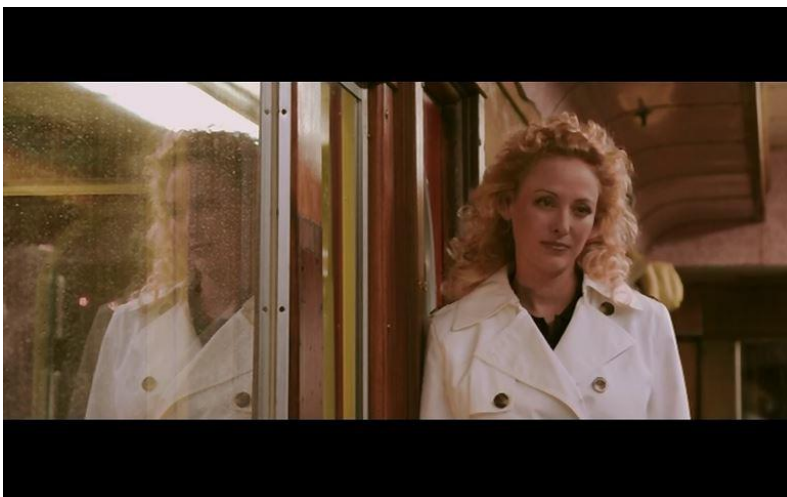


Fig. 38. Virginia Madsen as the Dangerous Woman. *From A Prairie Home Companion.*

The Dangerous Woman, also known in the film as the Angel of Death, wistfully looks on Rhonda, Yolanda, and the rest of the radio show's cast sits in the diner chatting about the success of their performance. When they notice her watching them, they look at one another with a mix of apprehension and confusion.

In one of the last interviews with Altman before his death, he spoke of his decision to end *A Prairie Home Companion* with a reverse tracking shot of Madsen's character. He said, "I thought it was about leaving it open about who was going to die next . . . she was the angel of death, and she showed up for one of them, but we closed the film before we showed you which one – sort of like real life" (Altman qtd. in *Altman*). That interview with Altman occurred less than one month before the director's death.

CHAPTER VII

“STOP LOOKING AT EVERYTHING EXACTLY THE SAME WAY:”²⁷ REFRAMING

THE WOMEN IN ROBERT ALTMAN’S FILMS

“Every film I’ve ever done, I really like. That’s not very modest and not the way you’re supposed to be, but you invest so much in them. I liken them to children. . . . And you do tend to love your least successful children the most. So I love all my films.”

– Robert Altman, to David Thompson, in *Altman on Altman*

“I never had any sense that Bob was a misogynist in life or in his work. I know Bob loved women and wanted to be around women. He was more comfortable in the world of women than in the world of men. He would be the first to tell you that.”

– Anne Rapp, Screenwriter, in Mitchell Zuckoff’s *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography*

The opening shot in Robert Altman’s *Dr. T & the Women* is, perhaps uncomfortably, a familiar scene in many respects. In the shot, the director’s camera closes in on the lower legs of a woman in stirrups being examined in the gynecologist’s office—a scene reminiscent of Frances Austin’s visit to the birth control clinic in Altman’s 1967 film, *That Cold Day in the Park*. As the camera pans out, we see an elderly woman wearing expertly applied make-up with her hat still resting atop her head and perfectly coiffed hair. The film opened to mixed critical reviews; and, as discussed very briefly in Chapter Four, is one of only nineteen films ever to receive an “F” rating from CinemaScore, the self-professed “industry leader in measuring movie appeal” (*CinemaScore.com*).

Perhaps the opening sequence of shots offended some viewers, causing unfavorable reviews and the low *CinemaScore* rating. *Dr. T & the Women* opens with a close-up of Dr.

²⁷ Robert Altman, in a 1991 interview with Michael Wilmington for *Movie Talk from the Front Lines: Filmmakers Discuss Their Works with the Los Angeles Film Critics Association*, reprinted in David Sterritt’s *Robert Altman: Interviews*.

Sullivan “Sully” Travis’ gloved hands between the legs of one of his patients. As the camera pans out, we see the woman’s legs in the familiar stirrups at the gynecologist’s office as she nervously chats with her doctor during the exam, asking about his wife and daughters.



Fig. 39. Dr. T’s Patient on the Exam Table. *From Dr. T & the Women.*



Fig. 40. Dr. T’s Patient Nervously Makes Small Talk. *From Dr. T & the Women.*

As Dr. T exams his patient, she somewhat anxiously makes small talk with her physician, inquiring about his family. The familiarity of the conversation between the patient, who is obviously not a young woman and not in the film for the sake of voyeurism, and her physician suggests she has entrusted him with her medical care for some time.

CinemaScore’s founder Ed Mintz notes that it is difficult to explain why audiences gave *Dr. T & the Women* such low ratings, since it is obviously not a horror film, which is the genre of films most likely to receive the “F” rating. However, he notes that *Dr. T* does fit the profile of another type of film that appears frequently on *CinemaScore*’s “F” list; he calls that

type of film “misleading auteurism” (Lincoln 8). According to Mintz, films that fit into the “misleading auteurism” type “are movies made by prominent, often Oscar-nominated directors that investigate risky and controversial subject matters;” however, because the films are “marketed [by studios] as more straight-ahead genre films” audience members are left feeling angry and confused (8).

If the studio’s marketing of *Dr. T & the Women* did contribute to the low audience scoring of the film, it would not be the first time this happened to an Altman-directed movie. Altman himself attributed the poor box office receipts and critical reception of *O.C. and Stiggs* to the fact that it was intended to be a parody of teen movies but was instead marketed *as being* a teen movie (Director’s Commentary, *O.C. and Stiggs*). Furthermore, Altman’s *Health* was likely never released because the studio did not really understand the film or how to market it to a ticket-buying audience. However, since Altman’s own production studio, Sandcastle 5 Productions, released *Dr. T & the Women*, it is likely the film was not marketed in a misleading manner; but, rather the audience had certain pre-existing expectations of the film based on Altman’s previous movies that the film simply did not meet. Further, the film’s “controversial” subject matter—a prominent gynecologist and his relationships with all the women in his life—would likely offend many movie goers since one of the longest lasting and most contested issues raised by the 1980s backlash against the women’s liberation movement has been the question of who has power over women’s reproductive rights. And, as has been the case with many Altman films throughout the director’s career, critics were quick to call the film misogynistic²⁸ in its depiction of women.

²⁸ See *RottenTomatoes.com* or *MetaCritic.com* for multiple negative reviews of *Dr. T & the Women*, many of which claim the film is misogynistic and the characters in the film represent shallow, stereotypical depictions of

Collaboration as Dialogue

The frequent and enduring criticism of Altman as a misogynistic director who depicts women in a negative manner ignores one crucial element of his filmmaking: collaboration. Altman's reputation for allowing the actors working on his films to revise scenes, improvise dialogue, and transform the characters they were portraying is legendary. As Louis Giannetti argues in his profile of Altman for *Masters of the American Cinema*, "he's arguably the most collaborative of major filmmakers, and he insists that his actors . . . are full partners in the communal enterprise of making a movie" (416). As Giannetti explains Altman's process, the director "welcomes suggestions from actors" during a film's production (430); and, while writers frequently complained that Altman would not follow the script they had written, actors who worked with the director had a different response. Actors admire him for this "because he allows them an unprecedented degree of creativity (430).

One of the most memorable scenes in *Nashville* provides an excellent example of this collaboration between director and actor, whereby the actor's understanding and interpretation of the character and the scene is what audiences actually see in the movie. In the example from *Nashville*, the scene appears about halfway through the film, when "America's Sweetheart," Barbara Jean as portrayed by Ronee Blakely, suffers a complete mental breakdown on stage while her audience watches with mixed emotions, including annoyance, disbelief, horror, and even resentment. It is the fictional singer's first public performance following a prolonged illness, and the audience had been looking forward to seeing and hearing their favorite country singer perform live at the Nashville amusement park.

women.



Fig. 41. Barbara Jean Breaks Down on Stage. *From Nashville.*

During Barbara Jean's first performance after being released from the hospital, she has a mental and emotional breakdown on stage and begins telling rambling stories to the audience. Pictured: Ronee Blakely as Barbara Jean in *Nashville*

Interestingly, Ronee Blakely revised – wrote would be a more accurate description – this scene from the original screenplay. In the scene as it appears in the film, Barbara Jean repeatedly interrupts her own singing with rambling, disjointed recollections from her childhood, which frustrates and angers her fans. Despite the audiences' growing restlessness and the singer's promise to get back to her music, the ramblings continue and Barbara Jean eventually is led from the stage looking helpless and confused. In the original screenplay, by Joan Tewkesbury, the scene merely calls for Barbara-Jean to faint and be carried off stage, with no indication of what is wrong with the singer (Giannetti 432).

Indeed, the actors working on *Nashville* not only wrote and revised their characters' lines, they also wrote the songs their characters performed in the film. These stories of Altman's collaborations are neither limited to the discussion by Giannetti, nor do they relate only to *Nashville*. Throughout his filmmaking career, Altman was praised by actors for not only giving them a voice in the creative process, but also for listening to that voice. Perhaps

Rene Auberjonois, who had roles in four of Altman's films, expresses it most eloquently:

"You could make up whole scenes with just these fragments of words . . . it was very liberating for an actor," (*The Directors: Robert Altman*).

And to those who ignore the collaborative aspect of an Altman film and focus instead on criticizing the finished product that plays before them on the screen, citing images of Sally Kellerman as "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan in *M*A*S*H* or Julianne Moore as Marian Wyman in *Short Cuts* as evidence of the director's misogyny, the actors who worked with Altman and portrayed those characters have something to say. When discussing her work with the director on *M*A*S*H* for the documentary series *The Directors: Robert Altman*, Sally Kellerman relates an anecdote about filming her controversial shower scene, which has been the subject of much criticism through the years. Most importantly, according to Kellerman, was that she was included in all discussions about the necessity of filming the scene nude; and, although she had never before appeared nude in a film, she agreed that it was necessary in establishing the context for the scene and her character in *M*A*S*H*. However, because Altman was concerned with Kellerman's comfort during the filming of the nude scene, the director arranged to have someone else from the cast or crew standing near her, but out of camera range, who also was naked when each take was filmed. According to Kellerman, Gary Burghoff was one of the cast members who stood nearby, in the nude, during the filming of one take, something that she found amusing because, in her words, "he was so cute." She said the scene took just three takes to get right, and she attributes the "success" of that scene to the willingness of the cast and crew to share in her nude scene, even if it was off camera.

In interviews for *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography*, Julianne Moore explains that when she was offered the part of Marian Wyman in *Short Cuts*, she was told the film included

a scene in which she would be filmed nude, but it would be from the waist down rather than the waist up, which is more common in American films. She said she accepted the part immediately, even though Altman reminded her several times during the conversation that the film's nudity was "not negotiable" (Zuckoff 430). She said she told him, "Yes, yes. I don't care. I'll do whatever you want me to do." To which he replied, "Well, sweetheart, really, just think about it. But I'm glad you're enthusiastic" (430). Of working with Altman on the film, Moore further claims the director would make actors feel as though they "never made a mistake" and that "everything you were doing was perfect" (431). Further, she says she "felt insanely comfort[able]" working with Altman on the film, bottomless nudity and all, because he was "so gentle" (431). Further, she attributes her level of comfort, as well as that of all other actors' working with the director, to the fact that he made all the casting decisions in his films, and "nothing you did on set could be wrong because . . . he didn't want anything different than what you decided to do" (431). And to those who might read condescension or misogyny into Altman's attitude toward the women actors starring in his films, it should be noted that both male and female actors relate similar experiences working with the director. Jack Lemon, who also appears in *Short Cuts* said, "He approached every [scene] . . . as if he invented [the camera] . . . and, because of his enthusiasm, you wanted to die for the guy—you would do anything he asked" (*The Directors: Robert Altman*).

Dailies and Dialogism

The dialogic nature of Altman's filmmaking—and as a result, the dialogic nature of his films—did not end with the preproduction collaboration with actors to create the characters they would portray in his films, nor did it end with the actors' frequent improvisation of lines spoken by those characters. The director also was known for inviting actors, crew, and even

friends and acquaintances to informal screenings of a film during the filmmaking process. In a 1991 interview with David Breskin, Altman described his process for conducting these informal screenings, which would include “an assemblage of film” from the daily takes. Altman said this process provided critical insight for him as it gave him the opportunity to see his work through the eyes of others. Furthermore, Altman said he would gauge the audience response to the film then make changes accordingly. If the audience responded favorably, he felt a sense of “glee”; but, if they responded negatively, he felt a sense of “embarrassment” (275). Altman said, depending on the audience response, he would “leave something in and enhance it . . . or take something out” (275). Through this process of daily screenings and receiving feedback, both verbally and visually, Altman would begin the dialogue between himself, his film, and his audience.

What’s Missing? What’s Next?

Altman’s feature films include four-hundred and twenty-eight credited women actors portraying characters with speaking roles; of these, more than one-hundred and thirty could be considered leading or supporting actors, not walk-ons or bit parts. Consequently, this work is neither comprehensive nor complete in its consideration of these women characters and their significance in American cinema and our shared cultural memory. Rather, this work is intended to open a dialogue about these women characters and to invite further discussion and discovery of their connection to our society in general. Further, there are notable absences in Altman’s films, issues and concerns that have become central to feminists in the twenty-first century, such as racism, LGBT rights,²⁹ immigration, and the impact of the intersectionality of

²⁹ Two notable exceptions to this are *Secret Honor* and *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*, which were adapted from stage plays by other writers.

discrimination in American society. One of the most notable absences from Altman's feature films is the depiction and discussion of race and racial inequality in the United States; therefore, these issues are not explored in this study. Moreover, Altman himself rarely discussed race or racism in interviews; not because he avoided questions on the subject, but it seems he was simply not asked about the issue.

While several of Altman's films do include some minority characters, most of the actors in his films are white. There are notable exceptions, of course, including Alfre Woodard as the resort hotel manager in *Health* and Whoopie Goldberg as the detective in *The Player*, as well as Harry Belafonte and most of the supporting actors in *Kansas City*, are the films and characters that immediately come to mind. There also are other exceptions; however, Altman's films never truly address issues of racism and the intersectionality of racism and sexism minority women experience. Consequently, even in the perceived absence of minority women in Altman's films, this aspect of his work would likely prove to be an interesting and worthwhile project for future studies.

Altman's Legacy

In the documentary film *These Amazing Shadows* (2011), by Paul Mariano and Kurt Norton, director Rob Reiner explains the cultural significance of American movies in a simple sentence. "If you want a window into what was going on in humankind at a given point in time, you look at movies." The documentary presents a history of the American movie industry and emphasizes the importance of the *National Film Registry*, a project of the United

States Library of Congress, in preserving movies as a way of preserving American culture.³⁰

To achieve the goal of preservation, “the National Film Registry selects twenty-five films each year showcasing the range and diversity of American film heritage to increase awareness for its preservation” (“About this Program,” *Library of Congress*). In *These Amazing Shadows*, Librarian of Congress Emeritus Dr. James Billington explains that films are selected based on cultural, historical, and aesthetic significance, because the Library is “not just preserving our films . . . [we are] preserving our culture” (*These Amazing Shadows*).

While some film scholars and critics have argued that Robert Altman’s “legacy is still being determined, in part because of the size and variety of his oeuvre” (*Harvard Film Archive*), that simply is not true—at least not entirely. If we are to give credence to the Library of Congress Film Preservation Board’s assessment of the director’s work, many of Altman’s films have *already* proven to be of cultural, historical, and aesthetic importance. Three of Altman’s films have been selected for inclusion in The National Film Registry: *Nashville* (1975) was selected in 1992; *M*A*S*H* (1970) was selected in 1996; and, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971) was selected in 2010. Clearly, Altman’s ability to capture on celluloid the essence of American life and culture throughout the twentieth century is well documented. As David Thompson writes in the “Foreword” to *Altman on Altman*, the director “has revealed his keen eye for the essence of American character and has brilliantly undermined empty myths, be they the glory of the Old West, the folksy homilies of country-and-western music or the splendor of wealth” (19). Further, Thompson argues it is “. . . Altman’s determination to

³⁰ The Film Preservation Act of 1988 established the National Film Registry and the National Film Preservation Board. From the Library of Congress web site, “The National Film Preservation Board works to ensure the survival, conservation, and increased public availability of America’s film heritage.”

convey the fleeting nature of life as we experience it, with all the frustration of its lack of precision and the pleasure of happy accidents” that distinguishes the director’s work from that of other filmmakers (19). However, Thompson is not alone in praising the director’s work. Having worked with Altman on the screenplay for *Popeye*, Jules Feiffer declared Altman a “genius;” but, then identified what he considers the biggest problem with the director’s movies by continuing, “there’s only a little of genius that’s allowed in American movies” (Zuckoff 360).

So, what are we to make of the women in Robert Altman movies? What can we learn from these films in the twenty-first century? Perhaps a lot. Robert Rosen, Professor Emeritus and former dean of the University of California at Los Angeles School of Theater, Film, and Television, claims we all are engaged in a dialogue with the past, present, and or future when we watch movies (*These Amazing Shadows*). Further, Louis Giannetti argues that Altman’s films are significant not for the director’s mastery of lights, camera, and sound, but for the message they convey about life. “His revelations of humanity can be funny or saddening, but rarely hackneyed. Like Chekhov and Vermeer, his artistry is found primarily in ‘little things’: not with plots or articulated themes, but with the poetry—and prose—of people” (416-417).

And Altman’s women characters *are* people, they are people created by the director working in collaboration with the actors and screenwriters on any given film; and, more importantly, they are people representative of the women found in our world who are facing the same concerns as everyone else. The diverse “personalities” of the women in Altman’s films illustrate the dialogic creation women in love and life. Clearly, the women characters in Altman’s films express, above all else, a kind of “self-love” that is neither narcissistic nor egocentric. Instead, it is a kind of self-love that facilitates their endurance and survival in a

world that is always challenging and frequently hostile. Further, as demonstrated in many of Altman's films, the distinction between public and private spheres is clearly articulated through and by his women characters. Implicit in this distinction is the understanding that what a woman does for money or love is not to be equated with the value of her contribution to the world.

It is through these characters in Altman's films that we can better understand the evolution of contemporary feminism and the importance of preserving the women's liberation movement. And if people do not understand or appreciate the message conveyed through Altman's women or in his films, the director offered some advice in interviews given throughout his career. According to Altman, the greatest films are those that expose audiences to new perspectives and cause them to mentally examine what they have seen on the screen. Moreover, Altman's films reflect his desire to create movies that do exactly that: expose audiences to new perspectives and invite them to think. Altman's films, through the disruption of expected genre conventions or character types, their multi-layered soundtracks, ensemble casts, and multiple plots and character arcs, encourage audiences to put aside what they think they know and "stop looking at everything exactly the same way" (Altman, qtd. in Sterritt 139). We, as the audience, must decide whether we accept the invitation Altman's films offer to examine the world from a different perspective.

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