



## ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

# M\*A\*S\*H

Perhaps it's all the fault of the U.S. Army and Air Force, who banned *M\*A\*S\*H* from their service theatres because it 'reflected unfavourably on the military,' that critical discussion of Robert Altman's hilarious, blasphemous black comedy has mostly centred on whether it is or is not an anti-war film. The question seems to me a monstrous red herring, first because the scriptwriter Ring Lardner Jr has buried any message he may have had to offer beneath a ton of crude, abrasive, utterly convincing dialogue; secondly, because this empirical method implies an empirical message, and if there's one moral that can safely be drawn from the succession of gags and incidents which provide the film's sprawling narrative structure, it's that inflexible attitudes to war (chauvinistic, religious, bureaucratic or heroic) lead straight to the straitjacket.

True, *M\*A\*S\*H* (short for Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) is set in a war, the Korean war to be precise, and its action takes place in a field hospital on the 38th Parallel. But only two shots are fired in the entire film (both from the referee's starting gun at an army football game), the enemy are neither seen nor mentioned, and the only direct reference to fighting comes when a veteran surgeon explains the absence of olives from the martini he offers a new arrival: 'We have to make certain concessions: we're only three miles from the front line.'

But though the front is never seen and its proximity never exploited, the fighting there casts a crimson pall over the entire film: 'the valley of the shadow of death' which the manic major invokes in fervent prayer is a harsh reality. Behind the opening credits, twin helicopters – motionless, blood-drenched bodies strapped to their stretcher platforms – glide slowly over low hills, hovering lazily in the air before descending into the parched plain where the hospital is camped. Not shown again, they in one sense continue to hover, as body after body is conveyed from stretcher to operating table to ambulance or coffin, while beneath faulty lights and in an emergency theatre more crowded than the average maternity ward, the team of surgeons pass their 12-hour working day poking dispassionately around inside the guts, chests, brains of this endless succession of anonymous casualties, whose spare and sometimes vital parts pile up in refuse pails beside the blood-soaked swabs.

Obviously much of the film's ironic tension derives from the contrast between the life-saving activity of the doctors and the destructive impulse of war. And this idea comes closer than most to being spelled out when two recalcitrant surgeons commandeer a Japanese military hospital to treat a local whore's baby: 'We stumbled on him. We didn't want him, but we couldn't back away from him.' But stronger though less explicit than the contrast between medicine and militarism is that between soldier and civilian. When a lady Major, horrified to find the doctors more interested in screwing than saluting her, remarks of the chief surgeon, 'I wonder how a degenerated

person like that could have reached a position of high responsibility in the Army Medical Corps,' the Chaplain tersely answers, 'He was drafted.' And one suspects the real source of official displeasure with the film is the way its enlisted characters obdurately persist in behaving like civilians. One Captain confuses lower ranks by habitually dressing as a private in fatigue clothes; a bearded doctor operates in a floral shirt, another in plus-fours and track shoes. No one salutes anyone, doctors and nurses devote all their extra-curricular energy to getting into one another's pants; the lady Major finds the Colonel bedded down with a sexy nurse when she storms in to complain of being exposed to public view in her shower; and everyone from the Colonel down is more interested in being demobilised than actually winning the war.

If the puritan lady and the religious fanatic are victims of vicious practical jokes, they seem to invite these by their own hypocrisy. (Tumbling into bed together with a cry of 'His will be done!' they contrast sadly with the doctor who seduces a willing nurse on the officers' billiard table by mumbling 'Love has nothing to do with this. If my wife were here, I'd be with her.') Sex becomes a bawdy corollary of the fight for survival which the doctors embody. A fight in which moral rigidity and heroic rhetoric have no place, as the Chaplain is twice forced to recognise: when he abandons the last rites to hold a retractor in a tricky operation, or later when he joins in a parody of the Last Supper designed to deter the camp dentist from suicide.

It's not just the rhetoric of Church and Army that receives the considerable weight of the script's satire, but also that of traditional war films. Throughout the proceedings an incompetent Tannoy (the most fully developed machine-character since the 2001 computer) announces such movies as *Halls of Montezuma*, whose inflated publicity blurbs stand in sharp counterpoint to the matter-of-fact realism which even shifts from irony to caricature cannot obscure: the amazing throwaway performances from the trio of surgeons, Yankee (Donald Sutherland), Jew (Elliott Gould) and Southerner (Tom Skerritt); the muted photography with its preponderant colours of camouflage-green and faded crimson (many of the gaudier scenes are shot through dirty windows) and marked preference for medium shots; the bedlam of the soundtrack, with overlapping dialogue and everybody talking at once.

But beyond analytic observations, *M\*A\*S\*H* demands to be taken, on its own empirical terms, as probably one of the most irreducibly funny films ever made.

**Jan Dawson, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1970**

---

**M\*A\*S\*H**

*Directed by:* Robert Altman  
©: Aspen Productions,  
Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation  
*Produced by:* Ingo Preminger  
*Associate Producer:* Leon Ericksen  
*Unit Production Manager:* Norman A. Cook  
*Assistant to the Producer:* Y. Ross Levy  
*Research:* Anne Sidaris \*  
*Director of Football Sequences:* Andy Sidaris \*  
*Assistant Director:* Ray Taylor Jr  
*Screenplay by:* Ring Lardner Jr  
*From the novel by:* Richard Hooker  
*Director of Photography:* Harold E. Stine  
*Special Photographic Effects:* L.B. Abbott,  
Art Cruickshank

*Film Editor:* Danford B. Greene  
*Art Direction:* Jack Martin Smith, Arthur Lonergan  
*Set Decoration:* Walter M. Scott, Stuart A. Reiss  
*Make-up Supervisor:* Dan Striepeke  
*Make-up Artist:* Lester Berns  
*Hairstyling by:* Edith Lindon  
*Titles by:* Pacific Title  
*Music by:* Johnny Mandel  
*Lyrics to Theme Song:* Michael Altman \*  
*Orchestration:* Herbert Spencer  
*Sound:* Bernard Freericks, John Stack  
*Stunts:* Eddie Smith  
*Medical Adviser:* Dr David Sachs

---

**CAST**

Donald Sutherland (*Hawkeye Pierce*)  
Elliott Gould (*Trapper John McIntyre*)  
Tom Skerritt (*Duke Forrest*)  
Sally Kellerman  
(*Major Margaret 'Hot Lips' O'Houlihan*)  
Robert Duvall (*Major Frank Burns*)  
Roger Bowen (*Colonel Henry Blake*)  
René Auberjonois (*Dago Red*)  
David Arkin (*Sergeant-Major Vollmer*)  
Jo Ann Pflug (*Lieutenant Dish*)  
Gary Burghoff (*Radar O'Reilly*)  
Fred Williamson  
(*Oliver Harmon 'Spearchucker' Jones*)  
Michael Murphy (*Me Lay Marston*)  
Indus Arthur (*Lieutenant Leslie*)  
Ken Prymus (*PFC Seidman*)  
Bobby Troup (*Sergeant Gorman*)  
Kim Atwood (*Ho-Jon*)  
Tim Brown (*Corporal Judson*)  
John Schuck (*Painless Pole*)  
Dawne Damon (*Captain Scorch*)  
Carl Gottlieb (*Ugly John*)  
Tamara Horrocks (*Captain Knocko*)  
G. Wood (*General Charles Hammond*)  
Bud Cort (*Private Warren Boone*)  
Danny Goldman (*Captain Murrhardt*)  
Corey Fischer (*Captain Bandini*)  
Rick Neilan (*General Hammond's aide*)  
J.B. Douglas (*Colonel Douglas*)\*  
Yoko Young (*Japanese servant*)\*  
Ben Davidson, Fran Tarkenton, Howard Williams, Jack Concannon, John Myers, Tom Woodeschick, Tommy Brown, Buck Buchanan, Nolan Smith (*football players*)\*  
John Mamo (*bald surgeon*)\*  
USA 1969©  
116 mins

\* Uncredited

**BECOME A BFI MEMBER**

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](http://bfi.org.uk/join)

**BFI PLAYER**

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](http://player.bfi.org.uk)

---

**ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER****M\*A\*S\*H**

Mon 17 May 20:30; Wed 19 May 14:30; Sat 29 May 20:45;  
Thu 10 Jun 18:00; Tue 22 Jun 14:30; Mon 28 Jun 20:40

**A Wedding**

Tue 18 May 20:40; Fri 11 Jun 20:30; Wed 23 Jun 14:30; Sun 27 Jun 18:10

**McCabe & Mrs Miller**

Fri 21 May 14:30; Mon 31 May 18:30; Wed 2 Jun 20:45; Sun 20 Jun 18:30

**California Split**

Fri 21 May 17:50; Mon 24 May 20:50; Mon 31 May 15:45;  
Sun 20 Jun 15:40; Thu 24 Jun 14:30

**The Long Goodbye**

Sun 23 May 18:30; Thu 27 May 20:50; Wed 2 Jun 14:30;  
Sat 19 Jun 17:30

**Robert Altman, Outsider and Innovator: An Illustrated Online Talk**

Mon 24 May 19:00

**3 Women**

Wed 26 May 20:40; Sat 5 Jun 20:30; Thu 10 Jun 20:30; Sat 19 Jun 15:00

**The James Dean Story**

Sat 29 May 15:30; Mon 7 Jun 20:50

**That Cold Day in the Park**

Sat 29 May 17:50; Tue 8 Jun 18:00

**Brewster McCloud**

Sun 30 May 19:00; Sun 13 Jun 16:00; Fri 18 Jun 17:50

**A Perfect Couple**

Tue 1 Jun 17:50; Mon 14 Jun 17:50; Wed 16 Jun 20:45

**Images**

Tue 1 Jun 20:50; Sat 12 Jun 15:30; Fri 25 Jun 18:00

**Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean**

Thu 3 Jun 17:50; Sat 19 Jun 12:30

**Thieves like Us**

Thu 3 Jun 20:40; Tue 8 Jun 20:30; Mon 21 Jun 17:50

**Fool for Love**

Sat 5 Jun 16:10; Sat 12 Jun 20:40

**Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson**

Sat 5 Jun 17:30; Sat 26 Jun 15:10

**Streamers**

Sun 6 Jun 13:00; Mon 21 Jun 20:40

**OC & Stiggs**

Wed 9 Jun 20:40; Tue 22 Jun 18:00

**Quintet**

Sat 12 Jun 18:10; Wed 30 Jun 20:45

**Popeye**

Sun 13 Jun 12:50; Tue 29 Jun 17:50

**Health**

Tue 15 Jun 20:45; Sun 27 Jun 12:15

**Secret Honor**

Wed 16 Jun 18:00; Sun 27 Jun 15:50

**Women in the Films of Robert Altman: An Online Panel Discussion**

Thu 17 Jun 19:00

**Beyond Therapy**

Thu 24 Jun 17:50; Tue 29 Jun 20:45

---

**Promotional partners**

A deliciously irreverent brewing company



<https://planetradio.co.uk/scala-radio>

---

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email [prognotes@bfi.org.uk](mailto:prognotes@bfi.org.uk)

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780