



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

McCabe & Mrs. Miller

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Disconcertingly, after the tuneless rendering of the Star Spangled Banner that introduced *Brewster McCloud*, or the 'Tokyo Rose' transmissions that lent an insane kind of musical continuity to *M*A*S*H*, it is Leonard Cohen's gentle ballad 'The Stranger' that both introduces and accompanies Robert Altman's latest film, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. Disconcertingly but appropriately, to the point where one suspects Altman of extrapolating his scenario from the song rather than from the Edmund Naughton novel on which he and Brian McKay based their script. The film stubbornly defies analogies or easy pigeon-holing; but its mood is closer to that of Cohen's writing, with its transitions from obscenity to finely wrought metaphor in the evocation of fear, tentatively raised hopes and final impenetrable loneliness, than to anything one had come to expect from Altman.

His McCabe is the embodiment of Cohen's dealer 'who wants to trade the game he knows for shelter.' He's first followed in long shot as his horse stumbles through the inhospitably darkening forest and blinding, muffling snowstorm towards the shanty mining town of Presbyterian Church. And the aura of defeat and distance established by the song and the opening shots clings to the character through all his ebullient triumphs, eclipsing even the reputation as a gunfighter that has preceded him into town. Ultimately we know, and he knows, that he is 'reaching for the sky just to surrender.'

The jovial black absurdity of Altman's earlier films, with their chaotic depiction of both licensed and unlawful lunacy, here darkens into a virtually existentialist notion of the Absurd. Though the jokes still fall as thick and fast, it is the film's muted but unanswerable sadness that predominates.

Formally, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* is a comedy Western, charting the fluctuating fortunes of McCabe (Warren Beatty), a small-time gambler now scraping the bottom of the barrel in Presbyterian Church. With his easily won profits, he invests in three 'chippies' of equally dubious cleanliness, dedication and talent, and is happily operating his makeshift bordello in tents poised on the edge of a construction site when an ambitious English whore called Constance Miller (Julie Christie) arrives with a proposition that glitters with promise of the big-time. Soon the pair are partners in a brothel whose unprecedented refinement brings the town trade and prosperity; and, in their wake, the representatives of a mining company, who send in hired killers when McCabe proves unwilling to be bought out at their price. By now emotionally out of his depth with Mrs Miller, and out of his league with big business, McCabe engages in a suicidal battle with the gunmen, and only the shareholders somewhere back East are left to reap the rewards of his labours.

Despite the stock characters of itinerant gambler and tough madam, both perversely refusing to conform to type, and the climactic gunfight that in the event proves disturbingly anti-climactic (photographed like much of the film through a pointilliste snow, and with none of the townsfolk even aware that

it's happening), the West provides Altman with considerably more than a formal structure. It is the very bones of his film, and Leon Ericksen's sets (on which Altman is said to have spent almost the whole of his budget before a frame was shot) are authoritatively realistic, recalling the uncomfortable and ramshackle constructions of old frontier photographs.

There is a sense of the transitory about all the relationships in the film, and the sets echo this: makeshift buildings always in construction or collapse; a church which rises throughout the film only to be finally gutted by fire. The weather, too, is unusually capricious, conspiring with the giant forests and empty landscapes to emphasise man's precarious footing in nature, caught and held in our last glimpse of McCabe's body being transformed and then obliterated by the snow. The very accuracy of the turn of the century period detail implies not just that these things shall pass, but that they have passed. Even the consistent mistiness of the camera work, like the opium to which Constance resorts to face the world, establishes the characters as lying just beyond our help or reach.

Then, too, the West provides Altman with material for extending his satire of American attitudes. It reveals an ideology and an economic system in the making, as McCabe's route from gambler to speculator, and final extinction at the hands of big business, takes him through a capsule version of the economic history of the United States. The exploitation of people and feelings is somehow an extension of a necessary exploitation of the land itself – an all too fragile and illusory defence against annihilation. Greed is the other side of fear, and even the exploited Chinese, whose lives are rated at only 50 dollars apiece, peddle their wares and run their opium dens.

As befits a hymn to vanquished individualism, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* is built around the uneasy relationship between its title characters – a relationship as makeshift and ephemeral as everything else in the film. But Altman again devotes much screen time to inconsequential exchanges between 'peripheral' characters, many from his repertory company, with René Auberjonois as always splendid as a scrounging Irish barkeeper. In keeping with the general deflatory emphasis, Warren Beatty manages to make the tired McCabe positively uncharismatic; and if Julie Christie never quite sheds her 'star' quality, her Eliza Doolittle-ish performance gains in liveliness and point from the realistic backgrounds it is set against. Their scenes together are funny and touching, the more so because the sentimental implications are never spelled out.

In case all this sounds too solemn for the maker of *M*A*S*H*, one should emphasise that the black humour continues unabated. When McCabe runs to the church to escape the three killers, he is evicted at the point of his own shotgun by an indignant minister declaiming 'This is the House of God'. Seconds later, a gunman smashes his way into the church, glimpses the shotgun, and blasts the minister savagely into a better world.

Jan Dawson, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1971

McCabe & Mrs. Miller

Directed by: Robert Altman
©/Production Company: Warner Bros.
Produced by: David Foster, Mitchell Brower
2nd Unit Director: Louis Lombardo
Assistant Director: Tommy Thompson
Continuity: Joan Maguire
Casting: Graeme Clifford
Screenplay by: Robert Altman, Brian McKay
Based on the novel McCabe by: Edmund Naughton
Director of Photography: Vilmos Zsigmond
2nd Unit Photography: Rod Parkhurst
Special Effects: Marcel Vercoutere
Editor: Louis Lombardo
Production Designed by: Leon Ericksen
Art Directors: Philip Thomas, Al Locatelli
Make-up: Robert Jiras, Ed Butterworth, Phyllis Newman
Hairdresser: Barry Richardson
Title Design: Anthony Goldschmidt
Songs by: Leonard Cohen
Fiddler: Brantley F. Kearns
Sound Mixer: Barry P. Jones
Sound by: John W. Gusselle, William A. Thompson
Research: Anne Sidaris

Cast:

Warren Beatty (*John Q. McCabe*)
Julie Christie (*Mrs Constance Miller*)
René Auberjonois (*Patrick Sheehan*)
Hugh Millais (*Dog Butler, the killer*)
John Schuck (*Smalley*)
Shelley Duvall (*Ida Coyle*)
Corey Fischer (*Mr Elliott, the priest*)
Michael Murphy (*Gene Sears*)
Keith Carradine (*cowboy with the big hat*)
William Devane (*Clement Samuels, the lawyer*)
Bert Remsen (*Bart Coyle*)
Antony Holland (*Ernie Hollander*)

USA 1971©
121 mins

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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

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