



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Robert Altman, Outsider and Innovator:

An Illustrated Online Talk

How strange it is to be writing this programme note! In the past, the talks I gave for BFI seasons were in the NFT cinemas, delivered to an audience sitting in the auditorium from behind a lectern to the side of the screen. Accordingly, my programme note would usually begin with words along the lines of 'Good evening, and thank you for coming along to this talk...'. But now I don't even know what time of day you'll be reading these words – it could be evening, morning or afternoon (and I don't want to begin with a 'Good day,' lest you think I am Crocodile Dundee reincarnated). Still stranger, while I still want to thank you 'for coming along to this talk', in this instance 'coming along' means you will in fact probably be staying at home, just as I will be, delivering the talk not from a lectern but from my kitchen table.

So yes, this will be the BFI's very first online talk delivered live by the BFI, and it's my first online talk delivered this way too, so I do hope you will forgive me/us if there are any glitches. It will be a different experience, not only for you but for me too. Sadly, I won't be able to see you – if you get bored you can even 'walk out' without my noticing – so I hope it won't feel too much as is I am just talking away to myself. You can maybe help me out there. Since this is not an in-venue event, we are making a few minor changes to the format of the talk; one is that instead of my inviting questions after I've finished speaking, we are inviting you to send in questions and comments *during* the talk, and I shall be addressing them at various points as we proceed. So please do contact us if you've any questions or comments about Robert Altman's work. Apart from anything else, it will be good for me to know that someone is out there watching and listening.

As ever, as I write this note, I'm determined not to duplicate what I'll be saying during the talk. In discussing Altman, I'll be concentrating on his work rather than his life; certain biographical details will arise, but for the most part only insofar as any events in his life shaped or influenced his films. I'll be trying to look at his work – what made it distinctive and special – with the dispassionate eye of a film professional: a critic or programmer. That said, this professional is also, of course, an amateur, in that I am also an ordinary human being with personal likes and dislikes. And I suppose the reason I am giving this talk is because I have long loved (hence that 'amateur') a great many of Altman's films. So it's that more personal response I'll briefly discuss here.

The first Altman film I ever saw was *The Long Goodbye*, screened in 16mm at a college film society in 1974. Such screenings, in echoing halls with dodgy sound systems, were notoriously poor when it came to deciphering dialogue (tricky at the best of times with certain Altman films), and often disastrous for watching movies shot in 'Scope; projectionists found it almost impossible to keep 16mm 'Scope in focus. Still, notwithstanding any presentational shortcomings, I emerged from *The Long Goodbye* exhilarated; I had never

seen or heard anything like it before. What other private-eye movie – indeed, what other movie, period – began with a lengthy sequence in which the protagonist fusses over getting the right brand of cat food to give his pernickety puss? Which other movie deployed endlessly inventive variations on its theme song, even working it into the narrative by having it played by a Mexican brass band or heard as supermarket muzak or door chimes? Which other cast included among its lead players a former singer best known for the pop hit ‘Little Donkey’, a successful movie director, a comedian from *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In* and an ex-baseball player? And which other movie was packed with witty allusions to earlier detective mysteries and movies about Hollywood? Oh, and it was even moving and said something interesting about the modern world. The riches were astonishing.

Over the next few years I sought out as many Altman movies as I could, catching up belatedly with the early ones and usually, from *Nashville* onwards, trying to see the new ones within days of their UK release, just in case they quickly disappeared from the cinemas, as did *A Perfect Couple* and *Popeye*. Just occasionally, I’d feel disappointed by what Altman came up with, but even with the lesser films there was usually something of interest, unusual, significantly different from what any other filmmaker was coming up with. And when Altman was on form, there were few who could match his magical brew of wit, intelligence, audacity, relevance, powers of invention, expertise with actors, compassionate humanity, and sheer cinematic grace and *brio*.

Thanks to my work, I was fortunate enough to interview Altman at fairly frequent intervals and we eventually got to know each other a little. (The first time I met him was to ask him about *Streamers*; the last time was on a flight to the Berlin Film Festival, where *A Prairie Home Companion* was about to premiere.) He even did me the honour of inviting me on to the set of *Gosford Park*, where he had me sit beside him as he directed a couple of scenes and took pleasure in showing me some of the rushes for another. I always found him friendly, helpful, funny, insightful, committed to his work, serious about the state of the world, and happy to talk about anything I brought up: exactly the sort of person one would imagine him to be, judging by his films.

My fondest memory, probably, is of the evening when an on-stage interview I hosted with him during our last retrospective ended with Altman being presented with a BFI Fellowship. There was a reception afterwards, and when his wife Kathryn finally persuaded him they should go home – he loved a party – upon reaching the door he turned around and burst into song: ‘It’s a long goodbye...’ At which point I joined in with, ‘And it happens every day...’ We serenaded one another for a few more lines of the song, and then the duet was over. Kathryn led him away.

Please rest assured that my talk will include no personal reminiscences. It’s the work that counts. Thank you for ‘coming along’ to the talk. I hope you find it interesting, and the clips enjoyable.

Geoff Andrew

Geoff Andrew is a writer, programmer and lecturer. Programmer-at-large for BFI Southbank, he is the curator of the BFI’s Robert Altman retrospective. His most recent book is the second edition of his volume in the BFI Classics series on Abbas Kiarostami’s *10*. He writes about film, music and the arts at geoffandrew.com

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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