



**ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER**

# Brewster McCloud

*Brewster McCloud* registers as an honourable failure: a species of crazed doodling with all the awkward, endearing earmarks of a promising 'first' film, in which a director tries to do and say everything at once, trusting to find his coherence in the cutting room. Wildly overlapping allegory, satire, TV burlesque, social protest, demented bird lectures and conventionally dull songs by John Phillips, the film nurtures a dream of 'escape by flight' from convention that is as innocently vague as its hero's, and as predictably doomed. But along the way are some glancing pleasures that suggest some of the achievements to come: the intercut and overlapping use of René Auberjonois' bird lecture in relation to the already fragmented plot, at least until this relationship becomes overly rigid and predictable; the debut of Shelley Duvall, an Altman discovery, as a Texas-grown variant of *Breathless*' Patricia; the bold delivery of certain oddball gags – like the instant splattering of a newspaper headline ('AGNEW: SOCIETY SHOULD DISCARD SOME U.S. PEOPLE') by a bird dropping, or the appearance of a tough hard-leather delinquent sporting a Porky Pig T-shirt – along with some looser forms of humour, such as John Schuck's likeable enactment of a conscientious, semi-retarded Houston cop.

It is only after the exorcism of *Brewster*, in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, that Altman arrives at a fluent and developed style which can support his semi-improvised approach. Henceforth, even his 'mistakes', like *Images* – an old Altman project predating *MASH* that was filmed after *McCabe* – will carry a technical proficiency and assurance that can support many calculated risks.

The 'open spaces' that Altman offers to his fellow craftsmen or creates for himself are obviously not identical to the ones that his films offer to audiences, but they are related none the less: the openness and variability of a film's conception can help to encourage an open and variable response.

Broadly speaking, shooting, editing and sound-mixing appear to be regarded by Altman as a process of elucidation, elaboration and discovery as much as one of execution. ('The script will indicate character and situation,' he has remarked, 'what I do comes on top of that.') Actors are occasionally employed without written parts, invited to 'fall in with the material' and create their own roles, or encouraged to alter or expand their scripted parts during rehearsals. Rather than scout every location in advance, Altman sometimes chooses to encounter them only when he arrives with his camera crew.

Equally significant are the 'open spaces' that Altman allows for during shooting and then fills at the editing or sound-mixing stage. The various announcements over the public address system in *MASH*, René Auberjonois' bird lecture in *Brewster* and Leonard Cohen's songs in *McCabe* were all arrived at and introduced long after shooting began; and one might deduce that the use of Susannah York's children's book (*In Search of Unicorns*) in *Images*, the title tune in *The Long Goodbye*, the radio shows in *Thieves like Us* and Phyllis Shotwell's songs in *California Split* were all partially determined after shooting was over. (Only partially, one assumes, because all four of these 'independent' elements figure briefly within the actions of their respective films.)

**Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1975**

To put it a little ponderously, much of the humour of Robert Altman's *MASH* derived from the fact that it consistently went against the grain of the conventional war film – not so much unconventional as anti-conventional; at the same time, the surreal presentation of the wilder antics at the Army hospital carried conviction because of the recognisable reality of each of the characters involved (even the surgery was accurate!).

*Brewster McCloud* has all of the surface anarchy of *MASH* (fragmented narration; a large number of 'characters', often talking over one another's best lines; a wealth of exhilarating detail, frequently to be found on the peripheries of the frame) but without that film's recognisable hard centre. This time, Altman attempts to graft some telling social satire on to a central character who hovers uncertainly between significant metaphor and free-wheeling fantasy – an Icarus child with horn-rimmed spectacles, endeavouring to fly above the corrupt materialism of the human condition. Part of the trouble is that Altman is rather more skilful at capturing the corruption than at dignifying man's attempts to escape it, and his wide-eyed hero, in the end literally, somehow falls flat on his face.

The screenplay (by Doran William Cannon, and not entirely free from the determination to be fashionably zany that characterised his script for *Skidoo*) seems anxious to emphasise that the film's central fantasy is rich in contemporary meanings; and to underscore the point, an impassioned lecture from an ornithologist is cut into the film at significant moments in the action. The lecturer is played by René Auberjonois (the restrained chaplain from *MASH*) in a marvellous creased-clothes, soot-covered, sweat-streaked portrait of empathetic scholarship: flapping his shoulder blades and puffing up his chest, growing more and more like a bird as the film progresses.

The conception may be dubious, but the characterisation is impeccable – and this holds true for so many elements in the film: Michael Murphy (another *MASH* veteran) as the blue-eyed boy of the West Coast Force, with a suitcase full of cashmere sweaters and specialising in unruffable calm, shooting himself when an accident reveals that at least one of his eyes is brown; Stacy Keach as the churlish miser, reaching for his gun when his helpful chauffeur tries to pick up the money he has dropped; William Windom as the soft-spoken politician with a smooth phrase for every journalist and a predilection for 'working' in his bath; or the pimply child calmly snapping his sadistic daddy's corpse with his Polaroid, while the bruised widow beams approval. Visually, and not a little ironically, the most successful surrealism derives from the use of the real Houston Astrodome (a glass and concrete answer to Dante's purgatory). Apparently, in the version of the script submitted to MGM, the film was to be set in New York. But Altman, as in *MASH*, shows a keen ear for Southern comfort, and one of his happiest inventions is the voice on the police car radio, transmitting details of the suspect's whereabouts and signing off with a cheery 'Proceed with caution, you-all.'

**Jan Dawson, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, July 1971**

BREWSTER MCCLOUD

Director: Robert Altman  
©/Production Company: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer  
Production Company: Lion’s Gate Films  
Producer: Lou Adler  
Associate Producers: Robert Eggenweiler, James Margellos  
Assistant to Producer: Ross Levy  
Research: Anne Sidaris \*  
2nd Unit Director: Louis Lombardo  
Assistant Director: Tommy Thompson  
Casting: Gary Chason  
Screenplay: Doran William Cannon  
Directors of Photography: Lamar Boren, Jordan Cronenweth  
2nd Unit Photographer: Don McClendon  
Editor: Louis Lombardo  
Art Directors: George W. Davis, Preston Ames  
Wings Designed by: Leon Ericksen  
Make-up: Edwin Butterworth  
Hairstyles: Dorothy White  
Music Composed and Conducted by: Gene Page  
Sound: Harry W. Tetrick, William McCaughey  
Stuntmen: Bill Couch, Ted Duncan, Jerry Buche, Robert Drake \*

Cast:

Bud Cort (Brewster McCloud)  
Sally Kellerman (Louise)  
Michael Murphy (Frank Shaft)  
William Windom (Sheriff Haskel Weeks)  
Shelley Duvall (Suzanne Davis)  
René Auberjonois (lecturer)

Stacy Keach (Abraham Wright)  
John Schuck (Police Lieutenant Alvin Johnson)  
Margaret Hamilton (Daphne Heap)  
Jennifer Salt (Hope)  
Corey Fischer (Police Lieutenant Hines)  
G. Wood (Police Captain Crandall)  
Bert Remsen (Policeman Douglas Breen)  
Angelin Johnson (Mrs Breen)  
Dean Goss (Eugene Ledbetter)  
William Baldwin (Bernard, Weeks’ aide)  
William Henry Bennet (band conductor)  
Gary Wayne Chason (camera store clerk)  
Ellis Gilbert (butler)  
Verdie Henshaw (Feathered Nest sanatorium manager)  
Robert Warner (camera store assistant manager)  
Keith V. Erickson (Professor Aggnout)  
Thomas Danko (colour lab man)  
W.E. Terry Jr. (police chaplain)  
Ronnie Cammack (Wendell)  
Dixie M. Taylor (nursing home manager)  
Pearl Coffey Chason (nursing home attendant)  
Amelia Parker (nursing home manageress)  
David Welch (Breen’s son) \*  
Mac Haik (Goodsole, Suzanne’s old friend) \*  
Edward Howard (dead man) \*

USA 1970©  
105 mins

\* Uncredited

ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Brewster McCloud

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

California Split

Mon 31 May 15:45; Sun 20 Jun 15:40; Thu 24 Jun 14:30

McCabe & Mrs Miller

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

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

The Long Goodbye

Wed 2 Jun 14:30; Sat 19 Jun 17:30

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

3 Women

Sat 5 Jun 20:30; Thu 10 Jun 20:30; Sat 19 Jun 15:00

Streamers

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

The James Dean Story

Mon 7 Jun 20:50

That Cold Day in the Park

Tue 8 Jun 18:00

OC & Stiggs

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

M\*A\*S\*H

Thu 10 Jun 18:00; Tue 22 Jun 14:30; Mon 28 Jun 20:40

A Wedding

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

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

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.  
We’re also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

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**  
  
**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**