



**ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER**

# Images

## Altman on 'Images'

Robert Altman was in London in February, cutting his new film, *Images*. To help audiences to stop thinking of him as the man who made *MASH* (and to forestall their indignation when it turns out not to be exactly funny), it will probably be publicised as 'the story of a woman who loved her husband more than she loved herself and therefore murdered him.' But probably is the operative word.

*Images* is not yet finished, and Altman, who is unusually insistent on the organic nature of film ('It's like a child, it's like anything that's growing. If you start trying to restrict it, you have a twisted thing'), is particularly reluctant to outline the shape of the film to come.

He admits that when *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* was at the same stage, he was willing, and indeed eager, to describe it to anyone who was interested, whereas he feels that any summary of *Images* is bound to be misleading. 'Which is probably the best indication I have that it may be a good film. Who was it, when he was asked for a synopsis of his book, said "If I could have written it shorter, I would have done it"?'

In view of his method of working, Altman's cautious reticence seems particularly sensible. He explains that he usually starts out with an idea of the kind of picture he wants to make rather than with a precise story and that this idea is apt to be considerably modified by the collaborative process of filmmaking ('The hidden artists – there are a lot of them whose faces you never see – who work on a picture'). A case in point is one of the few sequences in *Images* about which he was prepared to be both specific and enthusiastic.

'In the script and in the shooting and in the performance, it was the most singularly clever sequence in the picture. I shot forever on it. The people who worked with me had never known me use so much film. I was like George Stevens. I shot a close-up from this angle, a close-up from that angle. It was about a six or seven minute scene. I even shot a master shot. I shot a short master, a tight master ... I shot it so many different ways that René Auberjonois got sick eating spaghetti and everyone else just got sick of the scene. Then there was a problem and I thought we'd have to throw it out of the picture, but because of all that coverage we were able to put together an entirely different scene that I must say really works now.' Less than a week after I interviewed him, he telephoned to say that he'd cut a further 23 minutes out of the film, including the sequence he'd mentioned and which he now felt didn't work at all.

Altman says that the only thematic continuity he can find in his films is a preoccupation with the flexible boundary between sanity and insanity. When asked to define his initial idea for *Images*, he cautiously admits that it's 'about a woman who's insane, or at least has all the manifestations of insanity and schizophrenia.' In view of his reputation for realistic detail and his origins in industrial documentaries, he's very anxious to prevent his audience viewing the film as a clinical documentary about insanity, insisting that – like all his films, including *MASH* – it's very much a fairytale.

To underline its fairytale aspect, and to break away from the specifically American connotations of his last three films, he spent months searching for a

suitable location, 'looking for an environment which didn't exist.' Stockholm, Spain, Northern France and Canada were all considered before he settled on a remote old house in Ireland; though from what you see on the screen, he insists, you'd have no idea where the film took place. His characters' clothes were chosen to avoid suggesting too precise a period. To ensure the kind of spatial dislocation he was after ('we were trying not to pin it down to the mathematician returning to Cornwall with his wife to live'), he deliberately made his cast of six as international as possible: Susannah York (English) is married to René Auberjonois (American), while the two lovers who haunt her imaginings are played by Michel Bozzuffi (French) and Hugh Millais (Canadian).

'In *MASH*, we tried to give the audience the feeling that what they were seeing was just the window they were stuck at. That if they'd looked out another window, they'd have seen a different movie, though with the same atmosphere. In *Images*, you don't see anybody. When she drives to the railway station, there are some people, but you won't see them. You don't see any other cars, you don't see telegraph poles ... The idea is that we are dealing totally with the framework of someone's imagination. And when you have a dream, and you walk into a room, the only thing that's happening in that room is what's important to your dream. There are no rubber bands on the floor, no cigarette butts; there's just the gun in the corner, or the milk bottle on the table.'

The imagination that *Images* is describing is a violent one, and Altman admits that there's a great deal of blood in the three classic murder situations he depicts: a man shot with a shotgun at point blank range; another man stabbed in the neck while taking off his sweater; a third person driven off a cliff down a waterfall. But although the murders will be shown in graphic detail (unless, of course, he decides to cut them too), he insists that they'll convey no sense of realism, since in defiance of screen tradition he has chosen to show the violence as it affects its victims without indicating any intention on the part of the person perpetrating it.

Like his last three films, *Images* will be in Panavision ('a more natural look than most of the other lenses') and in colour ('I just don't see the world in black and white. It isn't real'). Yet Altman, who claims that he uses a zoom lens almost all the time but seldom uses the zoom part, and who is unperturbed at the prospect of filling a wide screen with a six-character fairytale, owns to a terror of wide angle lenses: 'There's a distortion to it, and I really don't like distortion. Vilmos [Zsigmond] made some fill-in shots of the house for *Images*. I'd told him to go out and surprise me. And they pan up from the lake to the house, and the house is all out of proportion and I just hate it. Yet it fits in the picture now so well that I'm embarrassed.'

While talking about *Images*, and reminiscing about *Brewster McCloud* ('the best picture I've made'), Altman is already thinking out his next two films: one, about a young person floundering about in an alien environment, which he doesn't want to discuss in case he changes his mind in 20 minutes time; and *Thieves like Us*, set in America in 1936 or 37 and 'kind of the son of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*.' He says that since he's decided he really enjoys working, he's given up believing that every picture has to be important. 'I think that you just keep working, and you can do little paintings, and big ones, and then you can do a mural if you want to, and then go back to little ones.' Where will *Images* fit into this scheme of things? 'It's a small canvas, but I think it's going to look very nice hanging up some place.'

**Jan Dawson, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1972**

IMAGES

Directed by: Robert Altman  
©: Equator Films Limited  
Presented by: Hemdale  
Produced by: Tommy Thompson  
Production Manager: Sheila Collins  
Production Accountant: Joan Collingwood  
Assistant to Producer: Jean D'Oncieu  
Assistant Director: Seamus Byrne  
Continuity: Joan Bennett  
Written by: Robert Altman  
'In Search of Unicorns' a book for children by: Susannah York  
Director of Photography: Vilmos Zsigmond  
Camera Assistants: Earl Clark, Nico Vermuelen  
Gaffer: Jack Conroy  
Grip: Paddy Keogh  
Special Effects: Terry Johnson  
Edited by: Graeme Clifford  
Assistant Editors: Michael Kelliher, David Spiers, Robin Buick  
Production Design: Leon Ericksen  
Miss [Susannah] York's Clothes: Raymond Ray  
Wardrobe: Jack Gallagher

Make-up: Toni Delaney  
Hair: Barry Richardson  
Music: John Williams  
Sounds: Stomu Yamash'ta  
Sound Recordist: Liam Saurin  
Boom Operator: Noel Quinn  
Re-recorded at: De Lane Lea  
Dubbing Mixer: Doug Turner  
Sound Editor: Rodney Holland  
Made at: Ardmore International Film Studios

Cast:  
Susannah York (Cathryn)  
René Auberjonois (Hugh)  
Marcel Bozzuffi (René)  
Hugh Millais (Marcel)  
Cathryn Harrison (Susannah)  
John Morley (old man)

UK 1972©  
104 mins

ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

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

McCabe & Mrs Miller

Wed 2 Jun 20:45; Sun 20 Jun 18:30

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

Brewster McCloud

Sun 13 Jun 16:00; Fri 18 Jun 17:50

A Perfect Couple

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

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

California Split

Sun 20 Jun 15:40; Thu 24 Jun 14:30

Beyond Therapy

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

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