



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Thieves like Us

The 35mm print of this film is sadly now too colour faded to present so we will be screening this film from a video format. We apologise for any disappointment.

At the beginning of his 1949 adaptation of Edward Anderson's *Thieves like Us*, Nicholas Ray isolated his two star-crossed young lovers in a glowing portrait-prologue, and characterised their tragedy as that of two people who had never been properly introduced to the world.

In an almost perverse antithesis (although the director has reputedly never seen *They Live by Night*), Robert Altman's version opens with one long, leisurely landscape shot that reduces characters to remotely gesticulating stick figures, and suggests how much of a tightly circular route their brief careers will follow. A railroad handcar, carrying a work party of convicts, appears in the distance; the camera follows it for a while across the lush Mississippi countryside, then passes on to pick up two escaped convicts fishing on a lake; amidst some inane, half-heard conversation about the advantages of fishing in the rain, they drag their boat to shore and climb a hill to wait for a third accomplice, just as the second piece of transport enters the picture – a prison van about to be hijacked by the escapees.

From the start, a predetermined doom hangs over both films, but where Ray follows closely, ecstatically and finally despairingly down the road taken by his couple, Altman draws back to watch tragi-comic figures flit through an absurd landscape. In fact, the one evidently weak spot of *Thieves like Us* is an extended sequence in which Altman tries hardest to be romantically at one with his young lovers while maintaining the ironic commentary of an observer who sees the traps ahead. As Bowie and Keechie make love for the first time – their hesitant approaches and timid discoveries dissolving together in a series of brief scenes so that time seems suspended over their happiest interlude – a radio broadcast of *Romeo and Juliet* is heard in the background, with a salient description of the pair falling in love at their first interview repeated twice in a curious refrain. The result is a sentimental cynicism, which Altman elsewhere excludes from his perspective: Ray's lovers have the innocence of juvenile runaways about to be slapped down by parental authority; Altman's might simply be playing like children or puppies, and their games are inevitably encroached upon by the necessities of a harder world.

In method and viewpoint (and also in terms of near-perfect achievement) *Thieves* seems closest to the excellent *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, Altman's previous foray into history and myth in which doomed romanticism and comedy of the absurd are equally at work. The phrase 'Thieves like us' is as crucial here as it was for Anderson and Ray – the latter was prevented from using it as his title – indicating the awareness of this trio of small-time

desperadoes that they are only doing what the sharks of private enterprise are doing in socially sanctioned ways. But its meaning is shaded by the emphasis given another reiterated thought: 'There's never been three like us', wishfully asserted by the elder of the group, T-Dub.

The boyish dream of being three against the world, of living up to the comic-strip and radio-serial heroes of childhood, is the comic motif of their careers; their withdrawal from deprivation into this particular kind of infantilism is as complete as the retreat of the miners in *McCabe* from their harsh environment to the reassuring warmth of bar-rooms, card-tables and McCabe's stoking of a specious reputation – the theme schematised by Altman into a pointed contrast between the landscapes within and without.

Here the theme is deployed more casually, but no less atmospherically, through the long sequence in which the gang goes to ground at the home of T-Dub's sister-in-law Mattie. Time palpably hangs heavy as the activities of Mattie's two children assume as much importance as those of the forlorn thieves: the little boy patiently tinkers with matches and fireworks, the girl apes her elders through a practice tap-dance; a dinner-table scene is a confusing colloquy of voices as the three men read that they now have rewards posted for them, dead or alive, while Mattie lectures the youngsters on table etiquette; and the two elder men attempt to while away the long period of enforced idleness by playing at bank robbers with the reluctant children – which ends in a fit of temper from the morose, drunken Chicamaw: 'Goddammit, play the game or else!'

Appropriately, the icons of the period loom pathetically large on the horizon of these depleted lives – literally so in the scene in which their hold-up of one bank is trammelled by the arrival of a truck carrying a giant coke bottle and surrounded by a mob of children – and Altman keeps tabs on the small adjustments to their hopes and ambitions through the details of dress and hairstyle. T-Dub dyes his greying hair when he sets up home with Mattie's younger sister Lula; Keechie's intimations of maturity are traced through the transformations of her hairstyle from her Little Orphan Annie look at the outset. And although he has been criticised for indulging the 'Polly Platt syndrome', Altman is singularly successful at working the continual rattle of radio tunes and 'gangbuster' serials as a real presence into the film, rather than simply as period evocation.

One scene in particular sums up the peculiar banality and sadness of this tale of absolutely predetermined life and death: 'It's going to rain,' announces Chicamaw, staring bleakly outside; and sure enough, in the next shot, the camera pulls back from rain on the windows to discover Mattie's boy lying on the floor, reading in the half-light by the yellow glow from a radio dial, while a voice crackles: 'Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!'

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, October 1974

THIEVES LIKE US

Director: Robert Altman
©: United Artists Corporation
Presented by: Jerry Bick, George Litto
Production Company: Lion’s Gate Films *
Executive Producer: George Litto
Producer: Jerry Bick
Associate Producers: Robert Eggenweiler, Thomas Hal Phillips
Production Supervisor: Thomas Hal Phillips *
Comptroller: Stanley Mark
Production Secretary: Kelly White Marshall
Production Assistant: Jean D’Oncieu
Assistant Director: Tommy Thompson
2nd Assistant Director: Mike Kusley
Screenplay by: Calder Willingham, Joan Tewkesbury, Robert Altman
From the Edward Anderson novel
Cinematographer: Jean Boffety
Camera Crew: George Bouillet, Harry Walsh III, James Blanford
Key Grips: Eddie Lara, Dennis Kuneff, Billy Record
Electrical Gaffer: Randy Glass
Editor: Lou Lombardo
Assistant Editors: Tony Lombardo, Dennis Hill
1st Visual Consultant: Jackson DeGovia
2nd Visual Consultant: Scott Bushnell
Property Master: Marty Wunderlich
Cars: Paul Neanover
Colour by: DeLuxe
Sound Mixer: Don Matthews
Dubbing Mixer: Richard Vorisek
Radio Research: John Dunning
Research: Carol Gister
Location by: Cinemobile Systems

Cast:

Keith Carradine (Bowie A. Bowers)
Shelley Duvall (Keechie Mobley)
John Schuck (Elmo ‘Chicamaw’ Mobley)
Bert Remsen (T.W. ‘T-Dub’ Masefeld)
Louise Fletcher (Mattie)
Ann Latham (Lula)
Tom Skerritt (Dee Mobley)
Al Scott (Captain Stammers)
John Roper (Jasbo)
Mary Waits (Noel Joy)
Rodney Lee Jr (James Mattingly)
William Watters (Alvin)
Joan Maguire (lady in train station)
Eleanor Matthews (Mrs Stammers)
Pam Warner (woman in accident)
Suzanne Majure (Coca-Cola girl)
Walter Cooper, Lloyd Jones (sheriffs)
Edward Fisher, Josephine Bennett, Howard Warner (bank hostages) *

USA 1973©
123 mins

* Uncredited

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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

Images

Sat 12 Jun 15:30; Fri 25 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

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

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

Sat 19 Jun 12:30

The Long Goodbye

Sat 19 Jun 17:30

California Split

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

McCabe & Mrs Miller

Sun 20 Jun 18:30

Beyond Therapy

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

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