



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Fool for Love

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

It's impossible not to see this adaptation of Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* in relation to his script for *Paris, Texas*, and difficult to believe, given the similar casting of Harry Dean Stanton, that some sort of family resemblance was not intended. This could be a continuation, or a 'prequel', or simply another version, an 'alternative universe' treatment, of the earlier film's family history. The Stanton character is now back in the trailer where he was living, before *Paris, Texas* began, with Nastassja Kinski and their child. The fire that violently ended that relationship, sending Stanton out into the desert where he was picked up at the beginning of the film, is now the ending of *Fool for Love*, with the character willingly consigning himself to the flames. On the other hand, the action here presupposes that the travelling man who disappeared at the end of *Paris, Texas*, having reunited two thirds of his family, went on to found another, and that this polarised universe was then bound to become one, its atoms rushing heedlessly to reunite and destroy themselves.

A science-fiction interpretation of this joint scenario seems as reasonable as any other. The forces unleashed within it – the madness, the mystery, the unfulfilability, of love – have a kind of alien purity that doesn't lead to emotional catharsis (although both films have their big scenes of revelation and declaration that nominally serve this purpose), but to a rarefied, a cosmic, geometry of the emotions. Shepard's melodrama doesn't so much recall Douglas Sirk as the early novels of Kurt Vonnegut: sarcastic and self-mocking, with similar characters and incidents orbiting around one another. This might, of course, be the final development of the cowboy mystique – whether as parody, satire or celebration doesn't really matter. Shepard's prose – say, in *The Motel Chronicles*, which is somewhere at the basis of *Paris, Texas*, if only as a mood – is a search for essential truths, objects, events. A cowboy leanness of statement combines with an intergalactic thinness of atmosphere.

Something so perfect in form also comes close to having no form at all; each of those prose-poem-statements is carried away by its own ineffable lightness of being. Which explains why the similar materials of *Paris, Texas* and *Fool for Love* have made such different films; the vaguest *metteur en scène* would perforce become an auteur when adapting Sam Shepard. The most obvious difference between Wenders' and Altman's films is that the first is in perpetual motion and the second stands stock still. The first, of course, was written as a screenplay and the second adapted from a play, but both have put their own construction on the void in the West that both surrounds and is the subject of everything that Shepard writes, the terrible interplanetary hollow after the madness of love has blasted through, or has yet to visit.

The travelling in *Paris, Texas*, after the blast, is another of those illusory Wenders odysseys to put it all back together, to reassemble the pieces of identity, home and family; within this rather achingly constructed void, another chimera, another searcher beckons – a Fordian figure who first set Wenders chasing chimeras, giving him an image for the loss of identity that this cinema had brought about in the first place. Altman, it must be said, is more rigorously post-Western when it comes to this kind of landscape: the opening

pan across the desert in *Fool for Love* takes in no chimeras of Monument Valley; Altman's most characteristic camera movement thereafter, the slow zoom in and out, isolates and freezes every action, permitting no references beyond the immediate *huis clos*. The irony is that director, writer and characters are very movie-conscious. Without giving the nod to any particular film, *Fool for Love* acknowledges that this is a movie-made world, whether as a fact of social life ('There's not a movie in a hundred miles that can match the story I'm going to tell,' declares Eddie, winding up to his revelatory scene) or as truth-and-illusion irony ('You can take it. You're a stunt man, right?' says May to her felled cowboy, having carried out her threat to exact her revenge in the middle of a kiss).

This last comment is the only clue in the film to what Eddie actually does for a living, as opposed to his own self-mocking posturings ('If you ain't a cowboy, you ain't worth shit') or the mock-mythic grandeur conferred on him by the film, as he first appears, striding from his truck against a livid evening sky, and accompanied throughout by a number of nouveau Western ballads on the soundtrack (which sing of love and jealousy and the 'Wyoming Man' whose 'heart beats for Cheyenne'). As befits the post-post-Western mood, the photography has the metallic hardness, the preternatural clarity of those European cameramen who have followed Robby Müller in their attraction to the Western void (here Pierre Mignot, Altman's regular for several films now). Shepard's double participation in the film, as the intellectual playwright and his own creation, both mythic icon and rodeo cowboy with a high-pitched twang, sets up its own strange reverberations. It pushes the Western significance somewhere beyond parody and self-consciousness, to a point, for instance, where the film can combine and portray the Arthur Miller who wrote *The Misfits* and the Clark Gable and Montgomery Clift who starred in it.

It's a point where Altman may have been for some time: not social criticism in the vein of *MASH* or *Nashville*, or genre criticism like *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and *The Long Goodbye*, but some extension of both into the strange life forms of *3 Women*. That 1977 film, in fact, already had a proto-Shepard in its cast – its only male character was a make-believe cowboy, Hugh O'Brien's stand-in on TV's *Wyatt Earp* – a similar washed-up civilisation in the desert (the Purple Sage apartments instead of the El Royale motel), and a similar sense that a void must be the busiest place in the world, forever replicating old life forms or germinating new ones. The question of which it is would determine whether the void is sterile or fecund, and on this point both films are ambivalent. It's also a properly science-fictional question, and Altman, who has recently created many such future conditional worlds, or states of mind, may be more attuned to this quality in Shepard than Wenders, who is always trying to pick up messages from the past.

3 Women, which begins with Sissy Spacek arriving at the Purple Sage apartments having run away from home, and ends with her perhaps about to leave her reformed ménage in the desert, moves in a circle. *Fool for Love*, which begins with May staring out of the kitchen window at the El Royale, towards the highway and Eddie's inevitable approach ('You know we're connected. We'll always be connected. That was decided a long time ago'), and ends with her description of how her mother was left after her evanescent father's last disappearance ('She'd be standing in the kitchen, just staring at the sink'), does something similar. Eddie and May's compulsive love-hate relationship is a doubling of that past marriage, or rather a doubling of a doubling, as the final suite of flashbacks makes clear. Eddie and May are the

progeny of one father and two mothers, who both had an all-consuming passion for their ambivalent, even neatly divided spouse, given to protracted, unexplained absences. When May’s mother finally tracked him down by some in-built radar to the town where he lived with Eddie’s mother (‘She knew she was crossing into the forbidden zone, but she couldn’t help herself’), the result was inevitably a collision of worlds, a cosmic big bang (Eddie’s mother shot herself) and a reformation of the constellations, a charging of different particles (the adolescent half-brother and sister) with the madness of love. But these recollected scenes (the voiceover of the recollector always slightly at odds with what is shown) don’t play like flashbacks in the conventional sense. They have a crisp narrative dynamism of their own that makes them more like one of those Moebius strip plots that are so popular now – back to the future for more time twinning. Similarly, the *coup de théâtre* that sets them in motion – Eddie’s revelation that he and May are brother and sister, discovered too late, after they had already ‘fooled around’ – doesn’t really play as such. It’s a mechanism to set all these processes of dividing, doubling and twinning in motion, like the similar scandalous revelations of *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*: mastectomy, mistaken birth and two sexes being conjured out of one. Even the old man’s terse explanation for his two-way family life – ‘It was the same love. It just got split in half, that’s all’ – attests to some biological need becoming a scientific principle for splitting emotions like atoms. And flashbacks finally have no place here because the past is always present – as Altman demonstrates in his own *coup de théâtre*, having the family then and now become joint residents at the motel. What he finally, sublimely, fills Shepard’s void with is a wealth of parallel universes.

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, July 1986

FOOL FOR LOVE

Director: Robert Altman
©/Production Company: Cannon Films Inc
Producers: Menahem Golan, Yoram Globus
Associate Producers: Scott Bushnell, Mati Raz
Executive in Charge of Production: Jeffrey Silver
Unit Production Manager: Allan Nicholls
Location Accountant: Kathi Hibbs
Production Assistants: Kevin St. John, Laurel Hargarten
Production Secretary: Joan Patchen
1st Assistant Director: Ned Dowd
2nd Assistant Director: Stephen Dunn
Script Supervisor: Luca Kouimelis
Screenplay: Sam Shepard
Based on the play by: Sam Shepard
Director of Photography: Pierre Mignot
Camera Operator: Jean Lépine
1st Assistant Camera: René Daigle
2nd Assistant Camera: Robert Reed Altman, Murray Van Dyke
Gaffer: Jonathan Lumley
[Gaffer] Best Boy: Janet Saetta
Key Grip: Bruce Hamme
Dolly Grip: Tom Grunke
[Grip] Best Boy: Arley Thomsen
Editors: Luce Grunenwaldt, Stephen Dunn
Assistant Editors: Nathalie Le Guay, Katya Furse Chelli, Michael Altman
Production Designer: Stephen Altman
Assistant to the Art Director: Robin Laughlin
Set Decorator: John Hay
Sketch Artist: Al Eylar
Property Master: Anthony Maccario
Construction Co-ordinator: Ben Zeller

Wardrobe: Kristine Fiones-Czeski
Make-up/Haidresser: David Craig Forrest
Titles: General Screen Enterprises
Music: George Burt
Assistant to the Composer: Joseph Makhholm
Conductor: Michel Ganot
Music Recording: Studio de la Grande Armée
Sound Mixer: Daniel Brisseau
Sound Assistant: Jean-Marie Blondel
Boom Operator: Éric Devulder
Re-recording Mixers: Neil Walwer, Jacques Thomas-Gérard
Sound Editor: Catherine d’Hoir
Assistant Sound Editor: Pascal Marzin
Livestock Furnished by: Bar YL Services Unlimited
Livestock Co-ordinator: Steve Meador

Cast
Sam Shepard (*Eddie*)
Kim Basinger (*May*)
Harry Dean Stanton (*old man*)
Randy Quaid (*Martin*)
Martha Crawford (*May’s mother*)
Louise Egolf (*Eddie’s mother*)
Sura Cox (*teenage May*)
Jonathan Skinner (*teenage Eddie*)
April Russell (*young May*)
Deborah McNaughton (*The Countess*)
Lon Hill (*Mr Valdes*)

USA 1985©
108 mins

ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

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

Thieves like Us

Tue 8 Jun 20:30; Mon 21 Jun 17:50

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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