



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Quintet

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

In the attempts to find an explanation for *Quintet*, it has been likened to *Images*, the art-house film Altman made at a time when he was thought to be one of the pacesetters (*MASH*, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*) in the New Hollywood genres. *Images* has definitely entered the record as an aberration: one of those essays in European sophistication by ambitious American directors, who in the process forgo the sophistication of their native cinema (all the compressed emotional, thematic and symbolic meaning of a highly evolved narrative tradition) for the sake of the literal representation of an 'idea'. Altman turned out a Laingian case history which held up a mirror, in fact all sorts of reflecting surfaces, to a disaffected personality.

But *Quintet* is cannier than that. It reveals the awareness of post-*Nashville* Altman that art (or truth, or life) is not something created by avoiding Hollywood clichés – the confidence of this period is also that he is no longer in danger of being overwhelmed by the old Hollywood – but an elusive or illusory goal that sustains the work in progress but is a doubtful commodity once it is complete. In this respect, it is almost anti-*Images* – since it declares the 'art' film a null and void pretension – and one of the purest of American films. It is a story without a subject, a form without meaning. For Altman, also, it has a kind of purity: if *A Wedding* positively sits up and begs to be liked, *Quintet* sits with its back to the audience and defies them to stay. It has stars, of course, but they are scarcely allowed to act in a way with which audiences could be expected to identify.

This makes it, along with *3 Women* and (to a qualified extent) *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, Altman's most audacious work. Beyond that, it is the most extreme statement of the rationale of all those films. Too large to be called their theme, too amorphous to be called their subject, Altman's concern with 'performance', with what happens to truth when one tries to find it through illusion, explains why those films were made. It is a nagging worry that crops up in pre-*Nashville* Altman, drifts drunkenly through that film, and now crystallises (leaves a masking of frost round the very frame, in fact) in *Quintet*, the 'point' of which, after all, is simply the game, quintet itself, a barren and meaningless thing, but the only thing there is.

In outline, the story would make a perfect Western, although the film in no way engages with Western elements, and certainly does not set itself against them, as do *McCabe* and *Buffalo Bill*. Instead of resisting convention, it accepts the mythic, apparently confident that its own nihilism is powerful enough to resist such a strain. Essex (Paul Newman), a seal hunter by trade, is making his way at the beginning across a snowbound waste, in an unspecified era, resignedly returning with his pregnant wife Vivia (Brigitte

Fossey) to the city from whence he came and where his brother and family still live. Sources of food in the outside world now seem to be exhausted, and life in general is coming to an end. The city proves to be an inert, cheerless place: a bare, ramshackle honeycomb, coated with ice, where people huddle in rags waiting to die (and roving packs of dogs instantly move in on the remains) or, if they are lucky enough to have the calling, engage in the one life-giving activity (though its end, too, is death), the game of quintet.

The rules of the game remain obscure, but at the highest level it is orchestrated in citywide tournaments, and players' names are circulated on pieces of paper, which establish who is entitled to hunt down and kill whom, depending on the outcome of the games. Soon after Essex's arrival, one player, Redstone, evidently not abiding by the roles, disposes of Essex's brother with a bomb which also kills the rest of the family, including Vivia. Before Essex can reach him, Redstone is killed by another player, St. Christopher (Vittorio Gassman). On the body, Essex finds one of the lists of names, and subsequently passes himself off as Redstone in order to penetrate the coven of tournament players and figure out the 'system' behind the game and the meaning of it all.

One of the singular aspects of this plot is that it has little emotional resonance. Essex's quest is pursued less out of the instinct for revenge than out of the need to know; and audience interest (where it has not already been discouraged by this appearance of po-faced allegory) is sustained by the faint hope that, if not the rules of the game, then some faint glimmer of the context in which it is played will be revealed. Given the mysteriousness of what the characters are actually doing when they gather round the quintet board, there is little that can be deduced about the film from the actual tactics of game-playing. (Essex's brother is also a collector of quintet pieces, and in one of the film's more 'significant' lines, Essex explains what is meant by this example of a 'hobby': 'That's just something to do for no reason'.) *Quintet* is not, in other words, akin to those Boetticher Westerns described by Andrew Sarris as 'floating poker games where every character took turns at bluffing about his hand, until the final showdown.' A fascinating parallel, however, because it anticipates *Quintet* in plot and supplies the direct resonance that it lacks, is a little-acknowledged Western of 1960, *One Foot in Hell* (director, James B. Clark). Alan Ladd, as an ex-Confederate with a chip on his shoulder, rushes his pregnant wife into an Arizona town, where the locals' hostility to him as a stranger prevents him from getting the medicine she needs, and she dies. Now taken somewhat guiltily to the bosom of the community, he becomes a leading citizen and is eventually appointed sheriff. But rehabilitation proves merely to be a cover for his long-gestating revenge against the men most responsible for his wife's death.

The relevance of this is that it suggests where the meaning of *Quintet* might lie: in its sense of community, and the hero's degree of adjustment or oppression within it. But the significance here is special to Altman, and has little to do with any vision of the post-holocaust world. On the level, say, of Boorman's *Zardoz*, the allegory of *Quintet* is a non-starter, although it might

be thought to share some of the artefacts of Boorman’s film: its peculiar sense of costuming, for instance, whereby the citizens who are not merely heaps of rags affect a kind of Renaissance splendour, or the bits and pieces of a burnt-out culture that have gone to make up the eerie latticework of the city, or Essex’s reminiscences to Vivia at the beginning about the city he remembers with a park, a lake and trees.

In particular, it would be difficult to reach any speculative conclusions about the government of the city, which seems to be divided between the mystic St. Christopher, who lives up to his name by tending the needy with soup kitchens and spiritual bromides (‘You must cherish your tortured life, because it is a pause, an interruption in the void preceding and following it’), and the amiable, pragmatic but obscurely all-powerful adjudicator Grigor (Fernando Rey). The latter is the most curious figure, his enthusiasm for quintet and specious justifications of it representing a reactionary, death-oriented power more sinister than the opponents Essex, having become ‘Redstone’, must face over the game. The casting of Rey might even suggest a pointed reference – *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* in *Nanook of the Northland* – were it not for the fact that Altman never seems to make references to other films. His own work, perhaps, is too caught in the contradiction of being at once supremely unselfconscious – he is not interested in examining or reflecting the processes of his own imagination – and self-centredly obsessed with how that imagination might be most fully embodied in film. And Grigor’s frustrating function here is the true measure of his villainy.

Richard Combs, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1979

QUINTET

Director: Robert Altman
Production Companies: Lion’s Gate Films, Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation
Executive Producer: Tommy Thompson
Producer: Robert Altman
Associate Producer: Allan Nicholls
Unit Production Manager: Jim Kaufman
Project Manager: Rita Shaffer
Project Co-ordinator: Victoria Barney
Project Auditor: Ralph Leo
Project Accountant: Dick Dubuque
Assistants to the Producer: Elaine diBello Bradish, David Fitzgerald
Assistant Director: Tommy Thompson
2nd Assistant Director: Charles Braive
Script Supervisor: Monique Champagne
Casting: Luca Kouimelis
Screenplay: Frank Barhydt, Robert Altman, Patricia Resnick
Story: Robert Altman, Lionel Chetwynd, Patricia Resnick
Director of Photography: Jean Boffety
Camera Operator: Paul van der Linden
Camera Assistants: Al Smith, Andy Chmura, Robert Guertin
Gaffer: Kevin O’Connel
Key Grip: Johnny Daoust
Special Effects: Tom Fisher, John Thomas
Train Designed by: Bombardier Inc Montreal
Editor: Dennis M. Hill
Assistant Editors: William Hoy, Raja R. Gosnell
Editorial Apprentices: Richard Whitfield, Jim Carter
Production Designer: Leon Ericksen
Art Director: Wolf Kroeger
Assistant to Art Director: Stéphane Reichel
Property Master: Steve Altman
Costume Designer: Scott Bushnell
Costumer: J. Allen Highfill

Wardrobe: John Hay
Make-up: Monty Westmore
Title Design: Patrice Ryan
Titles/Opticals: Pacific Title
Music/Music Conductor: Tom Pierson
Music Performed by: London Symphony Orchestra
Music Editor: Ted Whitfield
Sound: Robert Gravenor, Lion’s Gate Sound
Re-recording: Richard Portman
Post-production: Westwood Editorial
Sound Editors: Sam Gemette, Hal Sanders
Special Sound Effects Design: David Horton
Rottweiler Dogs [Supplied by]: Frank Inn Inc
Head Trainer: Glenn Garner

Cast

Paul Newman (*Essex*)
Vittorio Gassman (*St. Christopher*)
Fernando Rey (*Grigor*)
Bibi Andersson (*Ambrosia*)
Brigitte Fossey (*Vivia*)
Nina Van Pallandt (*Deuca*)
David Langton (*Goldstar*)
Tom Hill (*Francha*)
Monique Mercure (*Redstone’s mate*)
Craig Richard Nelson (*Redstone*)
Maruska Stankova (*Jaspera*)
Anne Gerety (*Aeon*)
Michel Maillot (*Obelus*)
Max Fleck (*wood supplier*)
Françoise Berd (*charity house woman*)

USA 1979
118 mins

ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Quintet

Sat 12 Jun 18:10; Wed 30 Jun 20:45

Fool for Love

Sat 12 Jun 20:40

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

3 Women

Sat 19 Jun 15:00

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

Thieves like Us

Mon 21 Jun 17:50

Streamers

Mon 21 Jun 20:40

M*A*S*H

Tue 22 Jun 14:30; Mon 28 Jun 20:40

OC & Stiggs

Tue 22 Jun 18:00

A Wedding

Wed 23 Jun 14:30; Sun 27 Jun 18:10

Beyond Therapy

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

Images

Fri 25 Jun 18:00

Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull’s History Lesson

Sat 26 Jun 15:10

Promotional partners



A deliciously irreverent brewing company



https://planetradio.co.uk/scala-radio

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](https://www.bfi.org.uk/join)

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

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

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.