



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Popeye

Altman on 'Popeye'

I really asked to do *Popeye* because ... why not? A movie is just a fantasy anyway. And it occurred to me that this was a chance to create my own environment, which I'd done in *Quintet* but it didn't work with audiences or critics. *Popeye* was never really a favourite of mine. I mean, I was certainly aware of him when I was very young. I was a sort of frustrated cartoonist myself, and it was easy to draw Popeye, easy to copy him. But I didn't really understand what I consider to be the social impact Popeye had until I decided I was going to do the picture, then went back and read a lot of the original comic strips.

What I think we're doing in both *Quintet* and *Popeye* is creating a culture that has its own restrictions and boundaries. I dare say that if I took you to some Sherpa village in Tibet, the way people live there and their customs would be as strange to you as the people in Sweethaven. *Quintet* was a lot more allegorical, because we only dealt with the principal characters, and everyone else was almost zombie-like. But of course that was part of the particular environment. What I'm trying to say is that the environment, the look of the place, the costumes, the fact of the dogs in *Quintet* or the absence of animals in Sweethaven ... all those things, whatever the rules I set up, are not anything you can immediately identify with. With *Popeye*, of course, I had the cartoon history to back me up. Had I invented the whole thing myself, and said okay, this is a fairy tale I'm going to show you, the picture would probably be a failure.

It's not possible, but I would love to be able to show *Popeye* to a broad audience of people who had absolutely no reference to the cartoons or the comic strips, cutting out the Max Fleischer extract and starting with the storm at sea. What would they think? I haven't the slightest idea. A few might say, My God, this is genius; ninety-nine out of a hundred would probably say this is the silliest thing I've ever seen in my life and get very angry. So the pre-knowledge people have of Popeye is on the one hand a help, and on the other a hindrance, because everyone has their own image, and if I don't live up to that, I'm either falling short or I've gone too far.

Robert Altman interviewed by Tom Milne and Richard Combs, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1981

A contemporary review

Popeye, the movie, seems to have existed for some time as one of those Hollywood projects that generates a lot of interest, speculation and negotiation, but which no one finally can bring themselves to make. The idea evidently came to Robert Evans after he was outbid for the movie rights to *Annie*, and he commissioned a script from cartoonist and E. C. Segar enthusiast Jules Peiffer. But it then passed, more of a hot potato than a property, from one director (Hal Ashby) who moved on to something else, to others (Arthur Penn, Mike Nichols) who didn't know what to make of it. Popeye and Olive Oyl were signed up (Dustin Hoffman and Lily Tomlin), but they too were lost. It has perhaps become the norm for big studio movies to go through this kind of mill before emerging as thoroughly homogenised

super-productions. *Popeye* emerged, however, in the hands of one of the industry's alternative-culture directors, and what is most interesting is how the two Hollywoods have found it a mutually happy hunting ground.

Affirmation is the order of the day, not merely because the musical comic-strip is hardly suited to any other mood, but because comic-strips in general seem recently to have become a mine of values once reserved to genres like the historical epic and the Western. *Popeye*, like *Superman*, is about the Creation, in national, religious and individual terms. It begins with the heavens erupting over a tiny figure tossing on a stormy sea, follows him to a haven where he has hopes of finding his lost paternity but which turns out to be suffering from too much of the latter, brings him halfway home by providentially turning the 'orphink' into a parent, then reveals that the answer to his problem is also the answer to Sweethaven's, before making him a final gift of the secret of manhood. Peiffer's script encompasses this outlandish fable in a wittily light-footed way, skirting all the Oedipal and Freudian traps into which his own strip characters invariably tumble. Similarly, the plight of the citizens of Sweethaven, squirming under the surrogate boot of their absentee dictator, is described in a pixillated fashion, somewhere between a comic fairytale of arbitrary monarchy and more contemporary rumblings of political paranoia.

The mood is summed up, as is much else that is disagreeable, by Olive Oyl when complaining about the 'ugly' hat she is expected to wear to her engagement party. 'I think it's a conspiracy. Why would they manufacture deliberate ugliness unless they wanted me to look ugly? We find that out, we'll find out everything.' Beneath this, however, both the substance and the poignance of *Popeye*'s odyssey derives much from its uncanny resemblance to *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*. Sweethaven is a precarious outpost on the edge of the wilderness, with a stirring anthem of Manifest Destiny ('God will always bless Sweethaven') to boost the spirits of these frontier folk, who also have hymns about more basic matters ('Everything Is Food'). *Popeye* is the stranger who turns up on a quest of his own, eventually to find his destiny become part of the community's. Thematically the parallel serves as a useful underpinning, although other ideas of Altman's (Sweethaven as a kind of limbo, into which the more human *Popeye* drifts, to be gradually converted into a cartoon character) don't really surface in the realisation, mainly because the comic-strip choreography imposes its own uniformity.

With delightfully inexact performances by its principals – hovering between caricature and mime, silhouette figures who are almost human despite themselves – the film is also a useful step back for Altman. It indulges his rambling, home-movie approach to his art, the atmosphere of a family or a stock-company enterprise, without quite the precious indulgence of *A Wedding* or *A Perfect Couple*. And it certainly puts him back into the mainstream from which he had wilfully strayed with the defiant confessional of *Quintet*. It is a vision of the past – America's and Altman's – of the roots of their cultural dreams. In its own idiosyncratic fashion, it works.

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1981

POPEYE

Director: Robert Altman
©/Production Companies:
Paramount Pictures Corporation, Walt Disney Productions
Executive Producer: C.O. Erickson
Producer: Robert Evans
Associate Producer: Scott Bushnell
Location Auditors: Richard Dubuque, Tim Engel
Assistant Accountant: Luciano Tartaglia
Unit Co-ordinators: David Levy, Peter Bray
Europe Production Manager: Frederick Muller
Unit Manager: Paolo Lucidi
Location Manager: Robert Eggenweiler
Post-production Co-ordinator: Suzanne Hines
1st Assistant Directors: Bob Dahlin, Viktor Tourjansky
Script Supervisor: Luca Kouimelis
Screenplay: Jules Feiffer
Based on characters created by: E.C. Segar
Director of Photography: Giuseppe Rotunno
Camera Operators: Giovanni Fiore, Gianfranco Transunto
Underwater Camera Operator: Lorenzo Battaglia
Unit Photographer: Paul Ronald
Special Effects Co-ordinator: Allen Hall
Animated Artifacts Created by: Cosmekinetics, Ellis Burman, Bob Williams
Animation: Hanna-Barbera Productions
Supervising Editor: Tony Lombardo
Editors: John W. Holmes, David Alan Simmons
Production Designer: Wolf Kroeger
Set Decorator: Jack Stephens
Draftsmen: Lester Smith, Stephen Bream
Property Master: Stephen Altman
Construction Co-ordinator: Stéphane Reichel
Costume Designer: Scott Bushnell
Wardrobe Supervisor: John Hay
Make-up Supervisor: Giancarlo Del Brocco
Make-up Artist: Alfredo Tiberi
Chief Hairdresser: Maria Teresa Corridoni
Hairdressers: Aldo Signoretti, Gabriella Borzelli
Title Design: Patty Ryan
Opticals: Cinema Research Corporation
Music and Lyrics by: Harry Nilsson
Additional Music: Tom Pierson
Music Performance: The Falcons
Songs Arranged and Conducted by: Van Dyke Parks
Supervising Music Editor: Ted Whitfield
Music Editor: Richard Whitfield
Music Re-recording Mixer: Dan Wallin
Dance Choreography: Sharon Kinney
Circus Choreography: Hovey Burgess
Mr Williams’ Dance Style Created by: Lou Wills
Sound: Bob Gravenor
Recordist: Doug Shulman
Boom Man: Don Merritt
Supervising Re-recording Mixer: Michael Minkler
Re-recording Engineer: Steven Brimmer
Supervising Sound Editor: Sam Gemette
Sound Editors: Sam Shaw, John Larsen, Bill Phillips, Michael Ford, Hal Sanders
Loop Editor: Larry Singer
Sound Effects Consultant: Rodney Holland
Sound Effects Editors: Teresa Eckton, Andy Patterson
Technical Advisers: R.J. Hohman, Steve Foster
Stunt Co-ordinator: Roberto Messina
Publicist: Bridget Terry
Studio: Mediterranean Film Studios

Cast

Robin Williams (*Popeye*)
Shelley Duvall (*Olive Oyl*)
Ray Walston (*Poopdeck Pappy*)
Paul Dooley (*Wimpy*)
Paul L. Smith (*Bluto*)
Richard Libertini (*Geezil*)
Donald Moffat (*the taxman*)
MacIntyre Dixon (*Cole Oyl*)
Roberta Maxwell (*Nana Oyl*)
Donovan Scott (*Caster Oyl*)
Allan Nicholls (*Roughhouse*)
Wesley Ivan Hurt (*Swee’pea*)

The People of Sweethaven
Bill Irwin (*Ham Gravy, the old boyfriend*)
Robert Fortier (*Bill Barnacle, the town drunk*)
David McCharen (*Harry Hotcash, the gambler*)
Sharon Kinney (*Cherry, his moll*)
Peter Bray (*Oxblood Oxheart, the fighter*)
Linda Hunt (*Mrs Oxheart, his mom*)
Geoff Hoyle (*Scoop, the reporter*)
Wayne Robson (*Chizzelflint, the pawnbroker*)

The Roughhouse Gang
Larry Pisoni (*Chico, the dishwasher*)
Carlo Pellegrini (*Swiftly, the cook*)
Susan Kingsley (*La Verne, the waitress*)
Michael Christensen (*Splatz, the janitor*)

And
Ray Cooper (*preacher*)
Noel Parenti (*Slick, the milkman*)
Karen McCormick (*Rosie, the milkmaid*)
John Bristol (*Bear, the hermit*)

The Steinettes
Julie Janney (*Mena Walfleur*)
Patty Katz (*Mina Walfleur*)
Diane Shaffer (*Mona Walfleur*)
Nathalie Blossom (*Blossom Walfleur*)

The Toughs
Dennis Franz (*Spike*)
Carlos Brown (*Slug*)
Ned Dowd (*Butch*)
Hovey Burgess (*Mort*)
Roberto Messina (*Gozo*)
Pietro Torrisi (*Bolo*)

The Housewives
Margery Bond (*Daisy*)
Judy Burgess (*Petunia*)
Sandra MacDonald (*Violet*)
Eve Knoller (*Min*)
Peggy Pisoni (*Pickelina*)
Barbara Zegler (*Daphne*)
Paul Zegler (*Mayor Stonefeller, the official*)
Pamela Burrell (*Mrs Stonefeller*)
David Arkin (*mailman/policeman*)

The Musicians
Klaus Voormann (*Von Schnitzel, the conductor*)
Doug Dillard (*Clem, the banjo player*)
Van Dyke Parks (*Hoagy, the piano player*)
Stan Wilson (*Oscar, the barber*)
Roberto Dell’Aqua (*the chimneysweep*)
Valerie Velardi (*Cindy, the drudge*)
Jack Mercer (*voice of Popeye in the animated prologue*)

USA 1980©
114 mins

35mm print courtesy of the Robert Altman Collection at the UCLA Film & Television Archive.

ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

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

Quintet

Wed 30 Jun 20:45

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