



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Health

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

Health is the last film that Robert Altman made under his contract with 20th Century-Fox, ending a run of films between 1977 and 1980 that certainly made him one of the most employed directors of the period. But it marked that end in almost total silence, since Fox were so unhappy with the film (reportedly because of disastrous sneak previews) that they allowed it to be shown no more than was necessary to fulfil their contractual obligations, and have since shelved it indefinitely. After such an ending, not even a whimper in commercial terms, one would not have been surprised if Altman had entered on a comparable period of unemployment, at least as far as the major studios were concerned. But, fortuitously, he then found himself at the helm of *Popeye*, co-financed by Paramount and Walt Disney, and certain to be one of his biggest box-office successes.

This sequence of events is not so much ironic as just plain confusing. In the Altman canon, *Health* is another of those intricately populated frescoes (*Nashville*, *A Wedding*), in which the sociable gifts of an amiable host and the suspicious instincts of a social satirist meet and neutralise each other in the bland Panavision spaces. They have, however, usually been his best card with both critics and public. The blockbusting *Popeye*, paradoxically, would have to stand on the other side of Altman, in the shadow with those more closely argued, leanly plotted and commercially dubious essays (*McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, *Quintet*) on the politics of community. This might seem a perverse alignment, given the comic-strip-fairy-tale-musical-comedy ingredients that make *Popeye* the perfect children's fantasy that grownups can enjoy too. But what is significant here is not Popeye himself, nor Olive Oyl nor Swee'pea, nor even the Thimble Theater characters whom Altman choreographs into his most delightfully scene-filling background yet. It is the town of Sweethaven itself, looking like the expressionist ghetto of *The Golem*, all crazy angles and impossible perspectives, yet not just clinging figuratively to the edge of this world but actually built on the side of a Maltese cliff, palpably inhabitable.

In its rawness and ramshackleness and yet solidity, it harks back to Presbyterian Church in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*. Sweethaven, of course, is a limbo society rather than a pioneer one – and at another extreme, the anonymous city in *Quintet* is a terminal one. But the Western connection is important to all three – in a way, is the real backbone of Altman's most substantial films. To begin with, it is curious that he should have painstakingly built 'real' settings for three such fantasies, while *Health*, a contemporary subject for which nothing had to be built, seems to be taking place nowhere in particular. The setting is St Petersburg, Florida, but this is just stated, never shown. The action is entirely confined to the hotel where a convention is taking place to elect a president for the national health food association. But compared to Altman's specificity about the city in *Quintet*, the hotel remains a strangely undynamic space, its geography unclear, even its décor (including the clutter of health food products and brand names) as blankly utilised as in those compendium films about various characters in various hotel suites.

Altman's one decorative flourish might be taken as a wry comment on this sense of enclosure and insulation. Occasionally punctuating events, a long shot of the hotel – the only time we are allowed outside it – reveals it to be, whether neon or sun-lit, a massively pink and fairy-tale structure. But the effect of the shot is somehow more forlorn than satirical. Partly this is because Altman's intention is not to satirise the health food faddists themselves but, through them, the whole American political process. That image therefore becomes the repository of both cultish eccentricity and national aspirations; it is Altman's America, a strangely antediluvian-looking dream castle. 'We had such high hopes in the beginning,' says the unashamedly opportunist hero at the end, about his failed attempt to re-woo his ex-wife, but with a clear and similar double meaning.

In the wistfulness of that remark and the quaintness of the pink elephant that houses the convention there also seems to be a suspicion that the inevitable fate of any society is a kind of entropy. The 'communal' ethos of so much of Altman's filmmaking, and his hesitation about attaching any definite meaning to the result, suggest his fear that once the community has been achieved, defined, it is done for. He has commented that he favours neither the old-world patriarchy nor the hippie communality of *A Perfect Couple*: both are passé, they have outlived their usefulness. Finally, and in line with this, that distant prospect of the hotel is the only time that *Health* holds still for long enough to throw up a conceptual image – the rest is a buzz of oddity that is still in the process of happening. The whole of *Popeye*, however, crystallised in the prospect of Sweethaven, is such an image.

To adapt an aphorism to Altman, the past – for which Sweethaven is a kind of surrogate – is not so much a foreign country as the one he would most like to believe in. The present is a constricting threat, to which the best response is to keep one's options as open as possible, settings and meanings as amorphous as possible. *Health* pursues this policy even more aggressively than *Nashville* or *A Wedding*. The two contestants for the presidency of 'Health' are Esther Brill (Lauren Bacall), the populist, platitude-spouting old trouser, and Isabella Garnell (Glenda Jackson), the severe intellectual who subsists on a diet of hot water and high-minded phraseology. Gloria Burbank (Carol Burnett) attends as a special adviser on health to the White House, while her ex-husband, Harry Wolff (James Garner), is, by coincidence, one of Esther's campaign managers. 'Dirty tricks' are the province of Bobby Hammer (Henry Gibson), who eventually cooks up a scandal about Isabella having had a sex-change operation, and behind him is the irascible 'fixer' Colonel Cody (Donald Moffat), representing the conspiracy theory of politics.

In addition, there is a galaxy of human scene-setting: chorines dressed as tomatoes and security men armed with walkie-talkies and armoured in corn-on-the-cob costumes. Real-life commentators drop in to commentate: Dick Cavett is host to a talk show being clumsily marshalled behind the opening credits, and while later touring the stands, he is 'surprised' to find Walter Cronkite among a gaggle of bystanders. At the end, Cavett hands over to Dinah Shore, who arrives to cover a hypnotists' convention – just as the health conclave had been preceded by the manure lobby. The reality here is the broadcasters' reality: conventions, like politics, are a way of life, what matters is the continuity, not what any particular event is putting on display.

In a way, the most important figure in *Health* is its most mythical and mysterious character, wild-eyed Colonel Cody. He has not been lightly named – or rather, he has not lightly named himself, for in the film's rather

reductionist scheme, even his metaphorical threat is finally defused by the revelation that he is simply Esther’s crazy brother Lester. But what he brings to mind, of course, is the charlatanism of the ‘authentic’ Cody in *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, and the charlatanism which for Altman always overtakes reality (history/politics) when it becomes identified with a performance (a Wild West show/movies). In the film’s two best scenes, ‘Colonel Cody’ briefly crystallises Health’s straying thoughts on the unreality of the reality of politics. Confronting Isabella, and abusing her for thinking she could take over the organisation he claims to control, he finally determines that her beliefs are genuine, i.e. that she is ‘real’, and therefore no threat to anyone. Then, confronting Gloria and abusing her for impulsively coming out in support of Isabella, he declares that neither she nor the White House are beyond his possibly lethal reach.

In Altman’s own expression, the real danger of the Colonel is that he is so crazy that people believe him. But his link with the past, however spurious, represents the most lucid symbol in the film for the country’s betrayed ideals. In a contemporary context, Altman’s identification of what he is doing with what he is describing is all the more instant and sentimental. His sham is the one we live in, the thin fuzz of ‘reality’ he puts on the screen and then leaves to its own devices encapsulates our helplessness and his authorial abdication. Ironically enough – given the assumption that Altman has supplanted genre filmmaking with a cinema of spontaneous combustion – it is only when he returns to the past, to something like a Western setting, that this identification becomes artistically interesting. Putting together a movie, recreating a society, in the rugged conditions of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, *Quintet* and *Popeye* is in itself a pioneer experience. These films consequently expand beyond the easy cynicism of *Nashville*, *A Wedding* or *Health*. At the time the town of Presbyterian Church went up, after all, Altman was known as the independent director prepared to spend most of his budget on getting the setting just right before cast and crew moved in, rather than the host of independent jamborees in which meaning has to be free-associated by cast and audience.

Richard Combs, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1981

HEALTH

Director: Robert Altman
Production Companies: Lion’s Gate Films, Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation
Executive Producer: Tommy Thompson
Producer: Robert Altman
Associate Producers: Scott Bushnell, Wolf Kroeger
Unit Production Manager: Robert Eggenweiler
Production Co-ordinator: Victoria Barney
Production Accountant: Richard Dubuque
Location Auditor: Ralph M. Leo
Production Assistants: David Fitzgerald, Peter Bray, Chip Cronkite, Peter Hawkins, David Levy
Assistant Director: Tommy Thompson
2nd Assistant Director: Robert Dahlin
Script Supervisor: Luca Kouimelis
Extras Casting: Rick Sparks
Screenplay: Frank Barhydt, Robert Altman, Paul Dooley
Director of Photography: Edmond L. Koons
Camera Operators: Jack Richards, Frank Miller, Mike McGowan
Camera Assistants: Jim Blanford, Gerrit Dangremond, Jack Gary, Robert Reed Altman
Gaffer: Randy Glass
[Gaffer’s] Best Boy: Tom Thatcher
Key Grip: Tom Prophet
Dolly Grip: Clay Wilson
[Grip] Best Boy: Bob Duggan

Stills Photography: Melinda Wickman
Editors: Tony Lombardo, Dennis M. Hill, Tom Benko
Assistant Editors: William Hoy, Raja R. Gosnell, Stephen M. Tucker, Eric Whitfield
Art Director: Robert Quinn
Set Decorator: Jacqueline S. Price
Prop Master: Stephen Altman
Costume Consultant: John Hay
Wardrobe: Beth Alexander
Make-up: Monty Westmore
Hair: Jerry Turnage
Title Design: Patrice Ryan
Titles/Opticals: Pacific Title
Musical Score: Joseph Byrd
Additional Orchestrations: Mickey Ingalls
‘Health’ songs written by: Allan Nicholls
‘Health’ songs performed by: The Steinettes
Music Supervisor: Allan Nicholls
Music Editors: Ted Whitfield, Richard Whitfield
Assistant Music Editor: Leslie Whitfield
Music Recording: Douglas Decker
Sound: Robert Gravenor, Don Merritt
Re-recording: Richard Portman, Bud Grenzbach
Sound Editors: David Horton, Sam Gemette, Randy Kelly
Publicity Manager: Bridget Terry
Publicist: Tom Grey

Cast

Carol Burnett (*Gloria Burbank*)
Glenda Jackson (*Isabella Garnell*)
James Garner (*Harry Wolff*)
Lauren Bacall (*Esther Brill*)
Paul Dooley (*Dr Gil Gainey*)
Donald Moffat (*Colonel Cody*)
Henry Gibson (*Bobby Hammer*)
Diane Stilwell (*Willow Wertz*)
MacIntyre Dixon (*Fred Munson*)
Alfre Woodard (*Sally Benbow*)
Ann Ryerson (*Dr Ruth Ann Jackle*)
Margery Bond (*Daisy Bell*)
Georgann Johnson (*Lily Bell*)
Mina Kolb (*Iris Bell*)
Allan Nicholls (*Jake Jacobs*)
Bob Fortier (*Henderson, chief of security*)
Nancy Foster (*Gilda Hoffintz*)
Joan E. Block (*Joan E.*)

David Fitzgerald (*desk clerk*)
Nathalie Blossom, Julie Janney, Patty Katz, Diane Shaffer (*The Steinettes*)
Dick Cavett (*himself*)
Dinah Shore (*herself*)

USA 1980
105 mins

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