



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Prêt-à-porter

A contemporary review

Fashion means a lot of different things to a lot of different people. It can be seen as an industry, as a social phenomenon or as an art-form. In his latest film, *Prêt-à-porter*, Robert Altman is mainly interested in fashion as social phenomenon, although he is personally well aware of its status as art.

Talking to an interviewer, he observed, 'I think that many designers are hype artists but that the majority of these people are real artists. That's very clear.' Nonetheless, as he noted immediately afterwards, 'Actually, I don't really deal very much with the designers and what they do. It's much more about media and related product and hype.' The problem, of course, is that without the art the hype appears pointless. The fashion world may caricature itself, unconsciously as well as consciously, and it may be cruel and absurd, but it is more than that. Without an acknowledgement of fashion's potential as art and thus as a value betrayed, Altman's satirical treatment of fashion loses its edge and begins to spin around in a grotesque vacuum. If he had taken the clothes more seriously, the satire would have carried more weight.

Prêt-à-porter is set in a world in which two or three genuine artists show their work, which is then drowned out by a kaleidoscopic rabble of supermodels, journalists, publicists, self-publicists, celebrity clients and assorted hangers-on and riffraff. Altman is interested in clothes and the role they can play in our behaviour, in our construction and projection of a self, in our obsession with image. He is amused by the fashion world in terms of its ethnographic peculiarities, its rituals and status systems, its propensity for farce. Fascinated by the glitz of the catwalk, he is not really committed to showing clothes as artefacts in themselves, as anything worth looking at seriously. For example, the re-creations of vintage Dior worn in the film by Sophia Loren are surely of enormous interest, constructed as they were from Loren's original fitting body (still retained by the house) and cut by Monsieur Claude, the same craftsman that worked there in the '50s when she was already a customer.

Unfortunately, they are scarcely visible in the snappily edited film – much too

long on its first cut – and we have to hope that the outtakes are deposited for future scholars in a fashion museum.

Prêt-à-porter is essentially a backstage fashion-show movie, in the same sense that *Nashville* was a backstage musical. Altman embeds fashion shows in a French facade in the same way that Frank Tashlin embedded rock 'n' roll numbers in the framing narrative of *The Girl Can't Help It*. We are given – very rapidly – just three major set-piece runway sequences, which display supermodels the traditional Ziegfeld way, the stately promenade modernised to frenetic catwalk (the key historical reference point here being Ossie Clark's proto-MTV introduction of pop music into his shows during the '60s).

But *Prêt-à-porter* misses its chance of becoming a *Girl Can't Help It* for future fashion cultists and connoisseurs. Tashlin's film, which set out to poke fun at rock 'n' roll, is still lovingly watched today not so much because of its gags or its social satire, but because it inadvertently immortalised a series of great moments in music history.

At the very end of his film, Altman gives the fashion show an anti-fashion twist by turning it into a public exhibition of nudity, with the female body as a site of authenticity, in contrast with the inauthenticity of fashion. Watching this update of The Emperor's New Clothes, I was reminded of Rudi Gernreich's experience with his topless bathing suit of 1964, which he deliberately chose not to show on the catwalk. Gernreich's use of nudity in fashion caused a flurry of press publicity but had very little lasting impact on fashion itself. It was too risky, too 'philosophical'. Twenty years later Peggy Moffitt, Gernreich's principal model, threatened to resign from the Los Angeles Fashion Group if the topless suit was modelled on stage at a retrospective of Gernreich's work. Moffitt protested that 'Rudi did the suit as a social statement. It was an exaggeration that had to do with setting women free. It had nothing to do with display and the minute someone wears it to show off her body, you've negated the entire principle of the thing.' Altman has argued that the presence of Ute Lemper, nude, eight and a half months pregnant, in the climactic runway sequence of *Prêt-à-porter*, 'took the titillation out of it'. Even if this were true, it still comes across as hype, exploiting shock effect to outdo the fashion world and establish Altman himself as cock of the walk.

Peter Wollen, *Sight and Sound*, March 1995

PRÊT-À-PORTER

Directed by: Robert Altman
©: Miramax Film Corp.
Presented by: Miramax Films, IMA Films
Executive Producers: Bob Weinstein, Harvey Weinstein, Ian Jessel, Angelo Pastore
Produced by: Robert Altman
Co-producer: Scott Bushnell, Jon Kilik
Associate Producer: Brian D. Leitch
Production Manager: Daniel Wuhmann
Production Co-ordinator: Agnès Berméjo
Supervising Accountants: Marie-Odile Bertot, Danielle Sotet, Marc Paris
Production Accountant: Martine Ledarath
Location Unit Manager: Eric Muller
Creative Consultant: Nathalie Rykiel
Assistants to Robert Altman: Signe Corriere, Konni Corriere
Assistant to Scott Bushnell: James McLindon
Production Secretary: Veronique Mutrel
Assistant to Sophia Loren: Ruth Bapst
2nd Unit Film & TV Director: Allan Nicholls
1st Assistant Directors: Jérôme Enrico, Philippe Landoulsi
2nd Assistant Directors: Olivier Greco, Emmanuel Hamon, Jean-Marc Joly
Script Supervisor: Carmen Soriano
French Casting: Guylène Péan, Alberte Garo
Written by: Robert Altman, Barbara Shulgasser
Directors of Photography: Pierre Mignot, Jean Lépine
1st Camera Assistant: Christian Fournie, William Watterlot
2nd Camera Assistants: Philippe Ramdane, David Ungaro
Key Gaffer: Michel Lefrançois, Michel Gonckel
Key Grip: Charles Freess
Still Photographer: Étienne George
Edited by: Geraldine Peroni
Film Editor: Suzy Elmiger
1st Assistant Editors: Dylan Tichenor, Lizabeth Gelber
Production Designer: Stephen Altman
Art Director: William Abello
Set Designer: Jean Canovas
Set Decorator: Françoise Dupertuis
Property Masters: Christian 'Coyotte' Portal, Pascal Declerq
Costume Designer: Catherine Leterrier
Fashion Co-ordinator: Christine Jolimoy
Wardrobe Supervisor: Olivier Bériot
Key Make-up: Judith Gayo, Jacques Clémente
Make-up Artists: Jean-Christophe Roger, Christophe Danchaud, Jack Freeman
Key Hairstylists: Paul de Fisser, Mirella Ginotto, Lolita Avellanas, Jean-Charles Bachelier
Hairstylists: Maury Hopson, Franck Mendoche, Constance Hartnett
Titles Designed/Produced by: Balsmeyer & Everett Inc
Computer Graphics for Main Titles by: Syzygy Digital Cinema
Negative Cutter: Match/Cut, Technicolor
Colour Timer: Mark Ginsberg
Score Composed by: Michel Legrand
Orchestra Conductor: Michel Legrand
Music Supervisor: Allan Nicholls
Production Sound Mixer: Alain Curvelier
Boom Operator: Samuel Cohen
Re-recording Mixer: Lee Dichter
Supervising Sound Editor: Skip Lievsay
Dialogue Supervisor: Philip Stockton

Dialogue Editors: Eliza Paley, Fred Rosenberg
Effects Editor: Eugene Gearty
Foley Supervisor: Bruce Pross
Foley Artist: Marko Costanza
Foley Editor: Frank Kern, Steve Visscher

Cast

Sophia Loren (*Isabella de la Fontaine*)
Anouk Aimée (*Simone Lowenthal*)
Marcello Mastroianni (*Sergei (Sergio)*)
Lauren Bacall (*Slim Chrysler*)
Stephen Rea (*Milo O'Brannigan*)
Kim Basinger (*Kitty Potter*)
Tim Robbins (*Joe Flynn*)
Julia Roberts (*Anne Eisenhower*)
Lili Taylor (*Fiona Ulrich*)
Tracey Ullman (*Nina Scant*)
Linda Hunt (*Regina Krumm*)
Sally Kellerman (*Sissy Wanamaker*)
Richard E. Grant (*Cort Romney*)
Forest Whitaker (*Cy Bianco*)
Rupert Everett (*Jack Lowenthal*)
Teri Garr (*Louise Hamilton*)
Lyle Lovett (*Clint Lammeraux*)
Danny Aiello (*Major Hamilton*)
Jean-Pierre Cassel (*Olivier de la Fontaine*)
Michel Blanc (*Inspector Forget*)
Jean Rochefort (*Inspector Tantpis*)
Anne Canovas (*Violetta Romney*)
Tom Novembre (*Reggie*)
Chiara Mastroianni (*Sophie Choiset*)
Rosy de Palma (*Pilar*)
Tara León (*Kiki Simpson*)
Georgianna Robertson (*Dane Simpson*)
Ute Lemper (*Albertine*)
Sam Robards (*Craig, Regina's assistant*)
Kasia Figura (*Vivienne, Sissy's assistant*)
François Cluzet (*Jean-Pierre, Nina's assistant*)
Tapa Sudana (*Kerut*)
Laura Benson, Laurent Lederer, Constant Anée (*Milo's entourage*)
Yann Collette (*coroner*)
Alexandra Vandernoot (*Sky TV reporter*)
Jocelyne Saint Denys (*hotel manager*)
André Penvern (*hotel clerk*)
Maurice Lamy (*bell boy*)
Pascal Mourier, Adrien Stahly, Denis Lepeut (*Fad TV sound engineers*)
Harry Belafonte, Paolo Bulgari, Anello Capuano, Cher, Helena Christensen, Gamiliana, Elsa Klensch, Serge Molitor, Claude Montana, Thierry Mugler, Tatjana Patitz, Eve Salvail (*themselves*)
Nicola Trussardi, Sonia Rykiel, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Christian Lacroix, Issey Miyake, Gianfranco Ferré (*themselves/designers featured with their collection collection*)
uncredited
Susie Bick, Carla Bruni, Naomi Campbell, Adriana Karembeu, Christy Turlington, Björk, Gretha Cavazzoni, David Copperfield, Linda Evangelista, Claudia Schiffer (*themselves*)

USA 1994

133 mins

ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Nashville Continues from Jun

Vincent and Theo Sat 3 Jul 11:20; Tue 13 Jul 20:30

Prêt-à-porter Sat 3 Jul 18:05; Mon 19 Jul 17:40

The Player Sat 3 Jul 20:40; Mon 12 Jul 17:45; Wed 28 Jul 20:30

Short Cuts Sun 4 Jul 11:30; Sat 17 Jul 19:30

Kansas City Sun 4 Jul 15:20; Thu 15 Jul 17:40

Cookie's Fortune Tue 6 Jul 14:50; Wed 7 Jul 20:40; Tue 27 Jul 17:40

McCabe & Mrs. Miller Tue 6 Jul 18:10

3 Women Thu 8 Jul 20:30

The Gingerbread Man Fri 9 Jul 20:40; Sat 17 Jul 17:50

Dr T & The Women Sat 10 Jul 15:00; Mon 26 Jul 20:30

Gosford Park Sun 11 Jul 15:20; Sun 18 Jul 18:20; Fri 23 Jul 14:30

The Company Tue 13 Jul 17:50; Sat 31 Jul 11:50

A Prairie Home Companion Sun 25 Jul 12:00; Sat 31 Jul 17:50

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