

American filmmaker Robert Altman dead at 81

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Robert Altman, whose film and television directing career began in the 1950s, died in Los Angeles Monday at the age of 81. He had been battling cancer for at least 18 months. Altman, as he revealed when he accepted an honorary award at the 2006 Academy Awards ceremony, also underwent a heart transplant some time in the 1990s. He was one of the most interesting filmmakers of the post-studio era in Hollywood, responsible for such works as *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), *Nashville* (1975), *The Player* (1992), *Short Cuts* (1993) and *Gosford Park* (2001).

Born in Kansas City, Missouri in 1925, the son of a successful insurance salesman and inveterate gambler, Altman was raised a Catholic and educated in Jesuit schools. He was a great reader as a child, later telling interviewers Michel Ciment and Bertrand Tavernier, “What formed me in my youth were the great realist writers of my epoch, Sherwood Anderson, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Hemingway.”

Altman joined the military in 1943 and flew bombing missions over Borneo and the Dutch East Indies. After attending the University of Missouri, he began making industrial films in his native city. After various fitful efforts, Altman started regular work as a television director in 1957, eventually directing dozens of segments of popular series including *Combat*, *The Roaring Twenties*, *Bonanza* and *The Millionaire*. Even in this first phase of his career, Altman regularly got into trouble with his employers, in particular because of his penchant for overlapping dialogue.

Altman came to mass prominence with *MASH* in 1970, an anti-militarist film set in the Korean war, but which struck a chord with audiences because of its obvious parallels to the ongoing bloody conflict in Vietnam. Somewhat crude and obvious, *MASH* is not, in my opinion, one of Altman’s more valuable works.

His most interesting period began with *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* in 1971 and continued through films like *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Thieves Like Us* (1974), *Nashville* (1975), *3 Women* (1977) and *A Wedding* (1978). The widespread radicalism of the early 1970s certainly nourished Altman’s iconoclastic and anarchistic sensibilities. He would tell Ciment and Tavernier in the early 1970s, “So we have this abject war that we are conducting in Vietnam. Our government only fights for purely economic, capitalist principles. It’s a commercial war.”

Something about his history and personality made Altman the appropriate chronicler, up to a point, of the growing economic and political uncertainties that beset the US in that period, bound up with the end of the postwar boom, the beginning of a long industrial decline, the loss of prestige and power to the advantage of Asian and European rivals, the deterioration in the living conditions of millions. At the same time, the studio system in Hollywood had gone into irreversible decline. All in all, the old American postwar “narrative” had broken down.

A gambler himself, thoroughly at home in an atmosphere of insecurity and instability, Altman tapped into a developing national mood and concretized it in evocative images. In an essay in *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary* (1980), critic Robin Wood noted that Altman “made artistic sense of the dominant technical devices of modern cinema, the telephoto

and zoom lenses.... Screen space today, instead of appearing stable and three-dimensional, is a matter of flattened or shifting perspectives as background and foreground move into and out of focus and distance is squeezed into flatness. Such technique lends itself to the expression of a sense of dream-like unreality, of instability and loss of control.”

Wood went on to argue that Altman’s films “reveal a consistent recurrent pattern to which these stylistic strategies are peculiarly appropriate. The protagonist, initially confident of his ability to cope with what he undertakes, gradually discovers that his control is an illusion; he has involved himself in a process of which his understanding is far from complete and which will probably culminate in his own destruction.” To be perhaps more socially concrete, Altman’s protagonist in these early films is often an individualist, a small operator with values of one sort or another, who comes into head-on conflict with more powerful, amoral interests and brutally loses out.

In *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, Warren Beatty’s McCabe, an enterprising tavern and brothel owner in the late 1800s in the Pacific Northwest, gets in over his head when a large corporation becomes interested in mining deposits in his town. When McCabe refuses the company’s offer, he seals his own fate.

Altman’s vision of Raymond Chandler’s fictional detective Philip Marlowe (Elliott Gould), in his version of *The Long Goodbye* (scripted by Leigh Brackett, who wrote *The Big Sleep* [also based on a Chandler-Marlowe novel]), *Rio Bravo*, *El Dorado* and *Rio Lobo* for director Howard Hawks), also owes something to this pattern: a somewhat naïve individual, burdened with the old-fashioned virtue of loyalty to friends, comes up against the new morality of the wealthy in Los Angeles in the 1970s.

In *Thieves Like Us* (based on the same novel that inspired Nicholas Ray’s 1949 *They Live by Night*), a smalltime thief, Bowie (Keith Carradine), breaks out of a Missouri jail in the Depression. He and his cohorts launch a string of smalltime bank robberies. His love affair with equally oppressed and inarticulate Keechie (Shelley Duvall) is doomed from the start, as the authorities inevitably close in Bowie and the others.

In these films, among the director’s strongest, one encounters both Altman’s sympathy for his creations, as well as bursts of contempt and disdain. This “intermittently disturbing” tendency of Altman’s, in Wood’s words, to “look down on his characters” recurred throughout the filmmaker’s career.

In a review of *Short Cuts* (*International Workers Bulletin*, November 22, 1993), I wrote: “Altman’s own outlook is akin to that of a small-time carnival operator, who is both fascinated by and at the same time exploits the idiosyncrasies of the public. He is very attached to the side-show freaks he displays, but they are also his source of income. By the very nature of his business, he is obliged to be clever and perceptive about people at the same time as he lives off their weaknesses. He feels contempt and compassion toward his fellow creatures, with the former sentiment, unfortunately, gaining the upper hand all too often.”

In his interview with Tavernier-Ciment, Altman explained, speaking of *MASH*, “From the start of shooting, I wanted to assault the public, to attack it. For me it’s the ‘villain’ of the film. Because I hold the public to be the guilty party (and in this public I include myself) for everything that we find unacceptable and that unfolds before our eyes. The ones guiltiest of the monstrous crimes committed under our noses are less those who commit them than those who permit them to be committed.”

Inevitably, artists and intellectuals who include themselves in the uncaring or apathetic ‘public’ they condemn can never be entirely sincere about this. The proposition has no internal logic. If I condemn those who heedlessly permit crimes to be committed than obviously I am *not* a member of the public who permits such things.

Altman belonged to a generation of film artists who no longer believed that America, warts and all, was synonymous or could be made to be synonymous with democracy, justice and freedom, but were far less clear about an alternative perspective. His works suggest the processes of chaos, dissolution, fragmentation. He said, “I look at a film as closer to a painting or a piece of music, it’s an impression.” In one fashion or another, he often repeated the following thought: “I have nothing to say, nothing to preach. It’s just painting what I see,” and “I’ll equate it with painting, an impression of character and total atmosphere that I am in. What happens because of what.” The filmmaker asserted that the idea for *3 Women*, for example, came to him fully formed in a dream.

This tendency toward intuition and spontaneity, with the accompanying formal means (a loose narrative or none at all, several distinct storylines, overlapping dialogue), produced important results in the 1970s. (Altman didn’t, in fact, improvise on set, as he told fellow director Robert Benton, “I just rewrite later than you do.” He explained, “I prefer to get up early in the morning to write the final dialogue for that day’s scenes. It’s not improvisation. It’s just a technique for keeping the work as spontaneous as possible.”) *Nashville* is not a coherent socio-political statement, but it provides an indelible picture of a milieu and certain social types. Thematically, *3 Women* remains an enigma, but something of the director’s revulsion at the kitsch and emptiness of American popular culture comes through, as well as his sympathy for its (female) victims.

Ultimately, the director’s ‘impressionism’ proved an insufficient resource with which to make sense of the upheavals of the late 1970s and beyond. Altman’s falling out of favor in Hollywood, particularly after the well-publicized failure of *Popeye* in 1980, no doubt had different components. Tavernier’s description of the filmmaker’s relations with studio executives would lead one to believe that he had made no shortage of enemies who were delighted with his newfound difficulties at the box office. More profoundly, Altman’s attitudes no longer resonated with sections of the middle class shifting toward Reaganite selfishness and conformism. He spent the 1980s working on television projects and filming stage works.

Altman ‘returned’ with *The Player*, an unfriendly look at the film industry, in 1992, but, just as it is with someone who has been through a particularly traumatic illness, he was never quite himself again. *Short Cuts*, based on Raymond Carver stories, had flashes of brilliance, with its complex series of stories about people in stunted economic and emotional conditions.

Kansas City (1996) truly showed Altman’s Achilles heel, more complex questions of history and American society. Set on election day in 1934, the film concerns the efforts of Blondie O’Hara (Jennifer Jason Leigh) to retrieve her husband, held by black gangsters for his part in a botched stick-up. Meanwhile, jazz musicians perform at the Hey Hey Club, run by Seldom Seen (Harry Belafonte), where Blondie’s husband is being held. (A young Charlie Parker is in the audience.)

This is what I wrote at the time:

“Two sequences sum up the film’s sourness and cynicism. In one, located at the film’s exact midpoint, an all-night saxophone battle

between [Lester] Young (Joshua Redman) and [Coleman] Hawkins (Craig Handy) is intercut with the brutal execution of a black taxi-driver—Johnny’s accomplice in the robbery—at the hands of the gangsters. Seldom Seen, whose underlings stab the driver to death, tells a racial joke while the killing goes on behind him.

“In the other, Blondie’s brother-in-law, a ruthless Democratic ward boss, literally clubs a crowd of vagrants, brought from out of town, into the polling station to vote for the Democratic ticket. He tells them that they are going to exercise their ‘God-given right to vote.’ And they are ‘going to vote how I tell you to vote.’ When a bystander objects to the non-residents voting, he is taken aside and shot. When Carolyn registers surprise at the shenanigans—‘The Democrats do that?’—Blondie replies, ‘This is America, lady.’ ...

“The emphasis in the election day sequences is not on exposing the claims of the Democratic Party to be the party of the ‘common man.’ That would be all to the good. It is rather on demonstrating that this common man is invariably a hopeless, and even willing, dupe of the powers that be. ‘Nothing has changed from that day to this; the little people are sheep; they get their ideas about life from the movies; politicians merely lead them around by the nose, etc., etc.’ This is pretty trite stuff.

“Altman’s disgust with the electoral process is legitimate and no doubt sincere. But one can draw all sorts of conclusions from disgust. His musicians—presumably representing artists in general—simply ignore the chaos and tragedy taking place around them and play, play, play. ...

“It is difficult to make a persuasive film about historical and social questions when one’s understanding of history and society is not up to the task. Intuition truly takes flight only when it has solid ground beneath it.”

Altman did his most interesting work because he had a considerable knowledge of film, art and literature, and also understood certain things about American society. He was right to be hostile toward official legends and myths (which he treated in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and, most prominently, although not successfully, in *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull’s History Lesson* [1976]), and toward official society (*A Wedding* remains a remarkable film and *Gosford Park*, although not of this caliber, has some of the same feeling).

In a review of *3 Women*, critic Andrew Sarris commented justly: “He wants his audience above all to remain restless and unsettled. He is the sworn enemy of happy endings and comforting morals.”

Altman’s sympathy for his female characters in particular was profound. The late Gwen Welles and Barbara Harris are especially memorable in *Nashville*; one also thinks of Ann Prentiss and Welles in *California Split*; Duvall, Sissy Spacek and Janice Rule in *3 Women*, along with others.

The filmmaker exhibited an entirely legitimate disdain for the Hollywood studios, their executives and their marketing departments. In an introduction to his interview with Altman, future filmmaker Bertrand Tavernier, who did publicity in France for the director’s films, remarks: “He would arrive from the US with the reels under his arms. On *Thieves Like Us*, this provoked a series of diplomatic problems because we saw it before officials at United Artists, who he treated with contempt like all the studio officials. He imposed me as publicity agent on *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* through insulting the official responsible for distribution in Europe. This sort of attitude caused his downfall in Hollywood.”

Altman maintained a healthy dislike for America’s elite to the end of his life. In the summer of 2001, when asked about the possibility of making another film in a US presided over by George W. Bush, he commented “I think I despise him and that whole Bush group so much I just wouldn’t do anything like that, because I couldn’t trust myself to have any humor about it. I just find it such a disgusting indictment of the country and I’m embarrassed by it.”

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Altman commented: “The events of

September 11 were terrible, but basically it's the same money game in this country. ... My feelings about America have changed, however. I was in England last year when the presidential election was taking place, and I said to my mates, 'This will be okay because it's going to the Supreme Court.' It did go to the Supreme Court, and we know what happened there. I felt like such a fool. I'm 76 years old, and I still believed in America up to that minute, and at my age I should've known better. Now I don't feel any emotional patriotic ties to this country at all."

By all accounts, Altman was a warm and sociable person, for whom actors loved to work. His weaknesses and failings are largely bound up with the period in which he matured and made films. His anti-establishment sentiment was as vague and unformed for the most part as it was sincere and deeply felt. His best films will endure.



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