

Letters on filmmaker Robert Altman

28 November 2006

The following are two letters received in response to “American filmmaker Robert Altman dead at 81,” posted November 23 on the WSWS.

Dear Editor:

I would like to thank David Walsh for his thoughtful and balanced commentary on Robert Altman. Having met Mr. Altman in person a long time ago and having admired him as one of our greatest film directors, I would like to add my comments to Mr. Walsh's.

No other American director—and not that many foreign ones, either—can boast a body of work as large or as consistent as Robert Altman's. True, he directed a few clinkers, (*Quintet* anyone?), but the quality of his films, particularly from the '70s: *Mash*, *Brewster McCloud*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *The Long Goodbye*, *Thieves Like Us*, *3 Women*, *A Wedding*, and especially *Nashville* (his magnum opus), remains unsurpassed by any other American director. Two of these—*McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Nashville*—arguably might even be considered among the best American films ever made.

From a technical point of view alone, Altman's greatness was his ability to fracture film in ways we had never seen before: through the kaleidoscope of multiple stories; unsurpassed camera fluidity that made him the least stogy of directors; a unique use of color and texture to fit the subject matter at hand (*McCabe*, *Popeye*, *Buffalo Bill*); an innovative use of multiple soundtracks and lifelike overlapping dialogue that sometimes sent producers into a tizzy; and a way of handling actors that made him legendary among performers—no easy accomplishment in a profession easily given to narcissism. But apart from the mastery of his craft in such novel ways, there was a quality that truly separated him from the rest of the pack and made him unique among his American peers: his ability to get under the skin of American society.

He was able to tap, perhaps unconsciously, into the ugly, soft underbelly of American society and show us its corruption, its banality, and its decadence (*Nashville*), bringing to mind two other greats: Welles and Chaplin. During the 1970s, he was perhaps the sharpest observer of modern, contemporary American society, which he always saw, until his death, with a jaundiced eye. No, Altman did not like capitalist society. He criticized it openly in some of his public pronouncements against the Vietnam War and more obliquely in his films, such as *Brewster McCloud*, *Nashville*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Gosford Park* (one of the few films in the past 25 years that could possibly be called a great American film, the other probably being Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*).

But even if his cynical view of the American dream and somewhat corrosive take on American society hadn't been so refreshing in a world of acolytes and conformists, there was something liberating about Altman's free-spirit style, especially when he first made a splash with *Mash*. It is not one of my favorite films of his; in retrospect, it seems heavy-handed and coarse. But given the period in which it was released, it came as a liberating breath of fresh air. Its anarchic

spirit crystallized in images what many of us felt at the time but perhaps couldn't express: that, indeed, the wind was blowing, and not necessarily in favor of the status quo. It showed us that it was possible to challenge and bring down the old and the oppressive. Of course, many of us developed way beyond that innocent and simplistic conception, but at least it was a beginning. Altman helped us question.

Sometimes here in Hollywood, my friends—most of them actors—and I play a rather malicious game in which one of us throws up any name, usually famous and sometimes not so famous, associated with the film and television industries. The rest decides whether that person, having sold out his/her principles for fame and money already is, or is on the way to becoming, a prostitute to the business. Several weeks ago, Altman's name up and everybody laughed because the suggestion was so absurd and ridiculous. The verdict was unanimous: NEVER!!!!!!

Robert Altman may have died at 81, but this most maverick of American directors—this man who stood up to Hollywood and its greedy moneyed men who know nothing about film as an art form, who loved actors and the art of acting, who passionately loved filmmaking as an art form, who approached his craft with such enthusiasm and a zest for life—was a man who acted younger than most directors half his age and always made films, whether good or bad, HIS way. Hollywood can be an intimidating place. Well, here was one man Hollywood was intimidated by. How could he helped not be loved by almost all the actors and crews he worked with throughout the years?

Back to when I once met him in the late 1970s. It was at the University of Maryland. I can't remember the subject of his talk, but it was delivered in a large auditorium to an SRO youthful and enthusiastic crowd that spilled over onto the street, where a sound system had to be installed. During the question and answer period, which would have gone for another two hours if someone had not put a stop to it, I asked him if he was a left-winger, a Marxist, as had been rumored among certain layers of the campus intelligentsia; if he was aware that a critic had called his films “poison letters to America.” He smiled and, with what appeared to be a twinkle in his eye, proceeded to evade the question, one suspects rather intelligently. “I am neither right nor left. I just try to capture something about society, to tap and reflect what's out there.” Well, I guess that was the best answer an artist could give, but, as with many of his films, I couldn't help feeling that he meant much more than he what he said.

Now he is dead, but I thank him for the pleasures he gave us through his films and for making us question, through his art, the very nature of the society in which we live (*Nashville*, *Mash*, *Brewster*, *Gosford*). Indeed, we mourn his passing, but more than that, as someone said of that courageous actress, Bette Davis, who also took on the studio system, we salute him. We are glad he lived among us and left us such legacy.

It is rather ironic that two colleagues of mine are producing and

writing a movie with multiple story lines. Not three days before Altman's death, I gave the producer a film he should study for inspiration. It was *Nashville*.

Indeed, as Mr. Walsh states in his thoughtful article, his legacy will endure.

RR

Los Angeles, California

24 November 2006

Thank you for your extremely well informed and sensitive review of Altman's life and films, though I suggest that a slight distortion on your part required to make your critique succeed also answers the question why you are a socialist and why Robert Altman was Robert Altman and not a socialist.

You criticize Altman for a "lack of logic" in condemning the public—in which he includes himself—as more guilty of the world's atrocities for permitting them than are those who deliberately initiate and pursue them. Altman stated, "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." (I say for starters that he has read too much Sartre and misunderstood it.) You write, "The proposition has no internal logic. If I condemn those who heedlessly permit crimes to be committed then obviously I am not a member of the public who permits such things."

You added the distorting "heedlessly," which is absent from Altman's self-critique. Altman does not permit such atrocities heedlessly, but the masses do, especially the American masses, hence his heartfelt contempt and disdain for them, despite his also genuine fondness and sympathy for them. Altman's posture vis-à-vis such monstrous crimes is clearly a heedful one.

I suggest that Altman's self-condemnation is not entirely exculpatory, but expresses self-disgust at not doing more to stop the atrocities even while feeling genuinely that he should do more. Yes, of course, such public declarations are also a sop to conscience. But you misdiagnose the want of "internal logic," which surely is (1) the hysterical breast-beating conscience-clearing falsehood that those who "permit" monstrous crimes are guiltier than those who plan, plot, and implement them; (2) that, pace Sartre, the notion that I permit such crimes implies that I have the power to stop such crimes, a patent falsehood, even if some idealized version of the actual population under different conditions of information and organization would have such power.

The central difference between you and Altman is again sharpened by a distortion on your part when you criticize his depiction in *Kansas City* of an average man's naiveté about the corruption within the Democratic Party machinery. Instead of showing, as you would wish, that the Democratic machinery betrays the working class to the interests of the ruling capitalists, Altman instead conveys "...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."

But in fact, Altman makes no claim about what the average man "invariably" is like, rather he describes how the common man typically, usually, and most importantly, as a representative of an organized mass, plays the role of the dupe and sheep of the ruling class, a description than cannot reasonably be disputed even though we can both point to many examples of proletariat heroes with courage and insight that are not, despite our wishes, representative of

that class. I doubt that Altman would deny such exceptional exemplary heroic examples.

We all rue that they are not more numerous. (Here, unwittingly, you avail yourself of a neo-Stalinist Social Realism critique—Altman should have more improving and uplifting proletariat heroes in his films.)

The major difference then, between yourself and Altman, is not so much your far greater understanding of history and the social forces that shape both it and individual consciousness. Rather, the difference is that Altman tended to see people as they are and are capable of becoming under the actual and foreseeable conditions of actual power and social organization in the United States, whereas you idealize them—Altman would say mercilessly—in the pursuit of a world that Altman considers impossible.

This fundamental difference shows itself by how Altman is shocked and dismayed and disgusted that democratic principles can be so flagrantly violated without arousing mass resistance amongst the American people. You quote Altman's reaction to the theft of the 2000 presidential election, which David North (and, obliquely, Vince Bugliosi) so trenchantly analyzed as the death knell of even the appearance of bourgeoisie democracy. "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."

I will add a story of my own. I have a friend in his late 70s, Vincent Salandria, who is still a practicing attorney. Vince is the first of the serious JFK researchers to have exposed that event as a state murder by the reactionary ruling class to prevent Kennedy from mitigating the US war effort and establishing detente with the USSR. Shortly before the 2004 election, Vince, a perennial temperamental optimist, enthused about Kerry's upcoming presidency as reflected in the polls. I, having read Bev Harris's "Black Box Voting," appreciated that control of the electoral process, including the vote count, had been usurped by the right wing of this county. I advised Vince, "Kerry will lose; in addition to all the Jim Crow, the vote count is rigged." Vince expostulated, "Never! The American people would never allow it!" I forget whether I had the wit at the time, or only later, to quip, "Are these the same American people who rose up in response to the overwhelming evidence of a state murder of JFK to take control of their government." In any case, Vince and I made a gentleman's wager—though neither of us is a gentleman—and I have unhappily been paid in full.

MG

Los Angeles, California

23 November 2006



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