

The socially critical films of 1974: Part 3

Robert Altman's *Thieves Like Us* (1974): “What is robbing a bank compared with founding a bank?”

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This is the third part of a series of articles on the socially critical films of 1974. An introduction and Part 1 were posted May 6, Part 2 May 8, Part 4 May 13 and Part 5 May 16.

US filmmaker Robert Altman's *Thieves Like Us* (1974) is a Depression-era film, with a script credited to Calder Willingham and Joan Tewkesbury, based on the 1937 novel of the same title by Texas-born Edward Anderson (1905-1969). The Anderson book is also the source material for the 1948 classic film *They Live by Night*, directed by Nicholas Ray.

Altman, whose best work includes *M*A*S*H* (1970), *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *California Split* (1974) and *Nashville* (1975), was one of the most insightful US filmmakers during the early to mid-1970s.

The socially intriguing and historically authentic *Thieves Like Us* was an opportunity for the director to reveal his attitude towards American capitalism during the Great Depression, one of its greatest crises, which inflicted massive human suffering. Altman's strong sense of period aptly captures Mississippi in the 1930s, where poverty was widespread and the conditions were some of the worst in the country.

The youthful Bowie (Keith Carradine), found guilty of killing a man in a hold-up at 16 (“It was him or me. He’d come around the car after me with a gun”), escapes from a prison farm and robs banks along with two former fellow convicts. Bowie, the alcoholic sociopath Chicamaw (John Schuck) and the aging lecher T-Dub (Bert Remsen) hide out with T-Dub’s sister-in-law Mattie (Louis Fletcher) and her children, including her older daughter Lula, the object of T-Dub’s attentions.

While hiding from the law, Bowie meets and falls in love with a young woman named Keechie (Shelley Duvall), embarking on a rawboned relationship doomed from the start.

Their involvement is touching and genuine. Altman and his screenwriters make a considerable effort to portray the manner in which feelings develop between two naïve, shy, inexperienced but nonetheless sensitive and receptive souls. They engage in small talk, they size one another up, they go round and round ...

“Want a Coke?” “No, thanks.” “I’ll go get you one if you want.” “It’s okay. I don’t want one.” “You cut your hair.” “I don’t know. I just sort of evened it off.”

And:

“Who’s your fella?” “Why do you ask that?” “I don’t know. I was just asking.” “Yeah, but why?” “I don’t know. It’s none of my business. It’s just most girls have a fella, that’s all.”

“I don’t know what most girls have.” “You never have had a fella?”

“No.” “Not even just to walk you to church or something like that?” “No. Why? Do you think I should’ve?” “No. I was just wondering. That’s your own business.”

Their budding, “star-crossed” romance plays out against the background of a radio production of “the most celebrated love story of all literature. The tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare,” portions of which we hear. Three times the radio announcer informs us, “Thus did Romeo and Juliet consummate their first interview by falling madly in love with each other.” The counterpoint is not subtle, but it’s still effective. This is a love affair in the face of everything—poverty, the police, society as a whole. In a harsh, dirty world, Bowie and Keechie develop deep affection and feeling for one another. There is a purity in their relationship, despite its coarseness, which is smashed up by the social order’s economic and social imperatives.

Eventually, Bowie is treacherously ambushed and gunned down by the police. His slaughter is witnessed by Keechie, who is restrained by Mattie, her lover’s betrayer. Bowie’s bullet-ridden corpse is laid out in the mud. In the final scene, a pregnant Keechie is at the train station, bitter that Bowie never shook off his criminal ways. (“I’m pretty deep in this business,” Bowie affirms at one point.)

A central theme of *Thieves Like Us* is summed up by T-Dub in the novel (although for some reason not in Altman’s film), in which he refers to those in “respectable” professions, such as bankers, politicians and police officers, as “just thieves like us.” This brings to mind the line from *The Threepenny Opera* of Brecht and Weill, “What is robbing a bank compared with founding a bank?”

Why did Altman choose to make such a work in the 1970s? In an obituary in 2006, we suggested that aspects of his history and personality made the filmmaker, who grew up in the Depression, the “appropriate chronicler, up to a point, of the growing economic and political uncertainties that beset the US in that period [the 1970s], 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.”

Thieves Like Us is Altman in his strongest period: progressive, provocative and forthright. He once asserted: “What I saw in the film was: You really liked these people and you really felt sorry for them and their dilemma. I thought it was a real look at the society thirty years from [*McCabe and Mrs. Miller*], the way it developed with free enterprise...”

“It was just the beginning of communications, radio was just coming into its own. Advertising was coming in. People were starting to behave the way they were told to behave, and yet there was no way out from poverty for those people, who were poor and uneducated ... With Bowie and Keechie, when they are together there is safety, and although it wasn't happiness, at least it was the absence of unhappiness.”

The film was made at a time of upheaval and convulsion, even chaos, qualities that the master improviser Altman thrived on. The period's rebelliousness undoubtedly played a role in making *Thieves Like Us* one of his most compelling films.

It is a realistic picture, an anti-*Bonnie and Clyde*, without the latter's somewhat glamorized depiction of gangsters and the Depression (and also less lyrical than *They Live by Night*). Unlike the beautiful stars Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway, Bowie and Keechie are uncouth and awkward; Schuck's Chicamaw is a drunken brute and Remsen's T-Dub a lascivious pawner of young women. The inebriated crooks act out robberies with Mattie's bored children.

A recurring joke adds flavor to the general effort to puncture pretensions: “Hey, you know what the Mississippi state tree is? ... It's the telephone pole.” “You know what the Mississippi state animal is? ... It's a squashed dog in the road.” And the state flower is “a weed.”

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 suggest 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 his 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 tragically loses out.

Altman's critique of American capitalism did not envision a social force that could overcome it. He tended to a certain ambivalence and even condescension toward his working-class characters (the latter quality became far more pronounced as his discouragement and cynicism grew in the 1980s and 1990s). The wavering leaves the door open to comments such as these by *New York Times*' critic Vincent Canby in February 1974: “Society doesn't destroy these men [in *Thieves Like Us*]. The Depression may have given them a push into their chosen professions, but they are, at heart, so self-destructive that I'm not at all sure they wouldn't have wound up much the same had they been farmers.”

The WWSWS obituary argued that

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.

Ultimately, the director's ‘impressionism’ proved an insufficient resource with which to make sense of the turbulence of the late 1970s and beyond. He was discouraged by the receding wave of radicalism. More profoundly, Altman's views no longer resonated with sections of the middle class shifting toward Reaganite selfishness and conformism.

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.

Altman accomplished his most interesting work, such as *Thieves Like Us*, because he had a considerable feel for film, art and literature, and also understood certain things about American society. 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.”

“By all accounts,” wrote the WWSWS, “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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