The world of Robert Altman: Auteur, Innovator and Iconoclast

By

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This Dissertation has been submitted in partial fulfilment of the BA (Hons) Film degree at Dublin Business School 2016. I confirm that all my work is my own unless otherwise stated.
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Barnaby Taylor, Programme Leader of the BA (Hons) Film for his invaluable help, guidance and support to me in not only in my research and writing of this dissertation but also for enthusiastically imparting his knowledge in all things film.

Dublin Business School and their library for their helpfulness throughout the year.

I would also like to thank my parents Susan and Gerard for their encouragement and unwavering interest throughout my degree.
Chapter 1: The early years and the Hollywood Studio System

Filmmaker Ron Mann’s recent documentary *Altman* (2014), features interviews with various notable filmmakers and actors who worked with Robert Altman over the years. Mann said that people who come to see his documentary “just to see Bob’s films” then he has done his job. Mann also more poignantly said that

“Altman was America’s greatest filmmaker and that his work matters more than ever now because it stands in contrast to all the sequels that Hollywood makes to sell lunch boxes”.

(Gilbey, 2015)¹

This quote encapsulates what Robert Altman stood for as a film director in that it illustrates his innovative approaches to filmmaking, his maverick tendencies and individuality. His vision, creativity and independence are a testament to his influential legacy which continues to inspire film makers today.


Film Critic James Monaco states that Altman was “long recognized in Europe as the true auteur of American Cinema who brought an ironic and irreverent gaze to bear on traditional American values”. ²

³
Contemporary filmmakers have drawn a lot from him and held him in high regard. Paul Thomas Anderson states that “I have stolen from Bob as best I can”. As he continues, Altman’s work was hugely important and was a major influence to him in his film career. He said it was more about the man than his movies, he also said that he was a real privilege to be around and that it was good to see him still angry, still throwing punches. Anderson would later dedicate *There will be blood* (2007) to Altman.  

Many actors who worked with Altman respected him, remained loyal to him, and recounted interesting and often humorous memories. For example, Lily Tomlin who made her feature debut in Altman’s *Nashville* (and was nominated for an Oscar for her performance) and also featured in his later films said he would cast anybody (even non-actors) in his movies if they were right for it in his eyes. She laughingly tells of a story of how he punched a studio executive into a pool when he tried to make changes to a film that Altman was working on. Nobody, especially an executive was going to tamper with his creative project.  

Keith Carradine (who appeared in three Altman films) says that Altman was impressed with the craft of acting and loved to create an environment which gave actors freedom to act in their own individual way. He echoed Tomlin’s point that Altman didn’t really cast actors as much as he cast people indicating that he wanted people who could fit in to this type of filmmaking. Elliot Gould (who starred in Altman’s first major success *Mash* (1970)) said that in the nature of Altman’s work “he gives you so much room that you can fill”.  

Tim Robbins (who starred in two Altman films) says that whenever Altman made a film “he created a unique and wonderful world on his sets, where the mischievous dad unleashed the "children actors" to play. Where your imagination was encouraged,
nurtured, laughed at, embraced and Altman-ized. A sweet anarchy that many of us hadn't felt since the schoolyard, unleashed by Bob's wild heart”  

Geraldine Chaplin (daughter of Charlie Chaplin and who had starred in several Altman films) states that when you rehearse for an Altman movie, he would ask have you brought your scripts. When we said yes he would say, “Well, throw them away. You don't need them. You need to know who you are and where you are and who you're with.” She further states that “It was like being onstage with a full house every second. All the circus acts you had inside your body you'd do just for him”. She compared the humour in Altman’s films to her father’s films. She said that they're “Funny in the right way, funny in a critical way—of what the world is and the world we live in. They were both geniuses in their way. They alter your experience of reality. They have their world and they have their humour. That humour is so rare.”  

This technique often took a form of improvisation which did not always work. Altman has his critics. Film critic and author Michael Dempsey states that his films “often display the pitfalls of improvisation” and that “Altman leaves just about everything to chance as a result, if passing moments and details fail to be fresh and exciting in themselves all we have left is a lifeless skeleton of themes or texture”. In speaking about Altman’s use of improvisation, film critic and screenwriter Jay Cocks (known for his collaborations with Martin Scorsese) said that his films “sometimes fall into a casualness and vagueness about ideas.”  

British Actress Greta Schacchi who starred in Altman’s The Player (1992) did not share fond memories of Altman’s methods. She recalls shooting the sex scene with Tim Robbins in absolute tension. Altman had wanted her to do the scene in the nude and infamously said to her "You get your ass on that set, take your knickers off and do what
you're paid to do”. She refused and herself and Robbins did just one take of the scene from their necks up. However, Altman the maverick that he was turned the publicity in his favour by suggesting that Scacchi not taking her clothes off was all his idea. Scacchi called him and complained and he laughed at her. “She further stated that he was not the sort of person to remember those things, he was an artist”.

It is very clear that there are many sides to Altman and people had radically different views of him. Not all of his films were considered “successful”. Some critics question his working methods and claim that his approaches adversely affected some of his film making. The dissertation will critically examine Altman’s work, his place in American film history, his influence and legacy.

To come to an understanding of Altman as a director one needs to look at Altman’s beginnings and his career as it took off in the 1970s. It is also necessary to address the Hollywood studio system, its golden years in the 1930s and 1940s, its steady decline in the 1950s and its eventual collapse the 1960s and its impact on filmmaking and the film industry. Altman worked during these significant changes.

For years (most prominently in the 1930s and 1940s) the Hollywood Studio system dominated the American film industry. As early as 1930 a series of mergers and realignments had concentrated 95% of all American production film production in the hands of eight studios

According to film author David A. Cook, there were five major studios in order of relative economic importance (20th Century Fox, MGM, Paramount, Warner Bros and RKO) and three minor (Universal, Columbia and United Artists). The major studios were organized via the means of vertical integration (corporations controlling the means not
only of production, but of distribution and exhibition (or consumption) as well through their ownership of film exchanges and theatre chains.\textsuperscript{13}

In addition to this, film author Douglas Gomery writes that the five major studios during the studio era can be best characterized as diversified theatre chains, producing features, shorts, cartoons and newsreels to fill their houses. The minor studios owned no theatres and were reliant upon the majors for first-run exhibition outlets. In all these eight studios (and in recent times six) dominated and defined the Hollywood studio system from filmmaking to world distribution to presentation—first only on theatrical screens, later via various other means such as video and DVD. They have been the core of the studio system.\textsuperscript{14}

Film critic Tim Dirks who created the film review website Filmsite.org writes that these studios with their escapist dream factories and their Front Office studio head, production chief, producers and other assistants were totally in control and in full strength. They exerted their influence over the choice of film, the budget, the choice of actors, directors, screenwriters and other personnel. In the late 1940s and early 1950s things began to change in the system.\textsuperscript{15}

One important change was being the advent of television which deeply affected film viewings and attendance. As a result of the steep decline in theatre attendance, studios were forced to find creative ways to make money from television. Converted Hollywood studios were beginning to produce more hours of film on TV.\textsuperscript{14} By the mid-decade the major studios were selling their film rights to their pre-1948 films for broadcast and viewings. Because of the inroads of television and inflation, the studios were also forced to diversify with other forms of entertainment like records, publishing TV movies and the
production of series. They had to sell some of their property (i.e. backlots). They devoted a substantial percentage of their production facilities to film the television series. 16

David A. Cook writes that while the studio still remained in operation, it continued to crumble under the combined threats of television, political pressure, rising independent production and perhaps most serious, loss of exhibition chains. By the mid to late 1950s, movie audiences were decreasing rapidly. Film attendance had dropped by 46 million admissions between 1946 and 1955. A significant amount considering up to that point, American theatres had averaged nearly 100 million admissions per week. Some studios were being either taken over by business conglomerates or had ceased production entirely. These reductions continued and financial difficulties increased and by 1966, 30% of all films made in America were independently produced and 50% were films shot on location in foreign countries to economise. In all 80% of films by the mid-1960s were made outside the ironclad studio system. Hollywood’s most profitable European markets had been severely restricted due to the post war import duties on non-domestic productions while the demand for American demand for foreign films had been growing steadily since the divestiture order of 1948 which first permitted U.S exhibitors to show what they chose rather than what the studios had chosen for them. This lead to an increase of foreign films being distributed in the United States from the late 1950s leading up to the 1960s.17

He goes on to say that as the Studio System declined, so did the star system which could be argued were indispensable to one another over decades. Star contracts went from long term to short term and finally to simple profit sharing options on individual films. This practice began as early as 1949 when studios like Warner Bros and Paramount began negotiating profit sharing deals for as high as 33% with some of their most notable stars. But the most dramatic one came in 1950 when Jimmy Stewart got a 50% share of the
profits from Universal’s *Winchester 73* (1950). Not surprising that the film was a huge success and Stewart made over 600,000 dollars in the process.\textsuperscript{18}

This deal generated a shift in the power of the star over the studio as stars had become much more independent of the system. Studio bound “contract stars” had become a thing of the past. Some even started to form their own productions companies. Notable examples of this during that period were Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas. Interestingly enough these stars along with so many others during the 1950s had started their careers under the studio system but now were working much more independently than the earlier stars had. The stars of this period had become much more in control of their own projects. This was the transitional period from the studios owning the stars to the stars owning the studios. The independent producer and packaged film was emerging.\textsuperscript{19}

According to film critic James Kendrick, other important events during that time were, (1) the demise of the production code and introduction of the new rating system, (2) Studios, because of financial constraints, were being acquired and taken over by business conglomerates, (3) The box office failure of so many formerly successful genres (the westerns and musicals) and changes of attitude in Hollywood films regarding subject matter. All of these factors contributed heavily to sowing the seeds of the demise of the system.\textsuperscript{20}

It’s fair to say that the 1960s was the key decade in film history as it saw the eventual collapse of the Hollywood studio system. The Traditional Hollywood era was well and truly over. It also saw the increased power of the director. Many of the directors of the Golden Age of Hollywood (King Vidor, John Ford, Howard Hawks, George Stevens, Michael Curtiz and Raoul Walsh) were making their swan songs during this decade.\textsuperscript{21}
Then the new generation of filmmakers began to emerge in the 1960s. Kendrick stated that they were fundamentally different from their classic Hollywood predecessors. Instead of people who had worked their way up through the system learning the craft of filmmaking from those above them, this generation were composed of young brash self-proclaimed artists who were raised on television and had studied film at school. They were well in tune with youth culture. They were primed to revolutionize American Cinema.  

Kendrick continues by writing that up to that point, the producer and the studio for decades were the ones who called the shots. Now the directors were given the space for more creative freedom. They were regarded as powerful and creative auteurs of cinema. The auteur status of the director became much more prevalent in the 1960s and became a key element in galvanizing the reputations of the new these new wave of filmmakers. It was used as a strategy to guarantee a relationship between audience and movie and subsequently bring audiences back to the theatre. The notion of violence was central to the formation of this auteur status. Many of these filmmakers had formed their careers and built up their reputations through their depictions and representations of violence on screen. The Vietnam War was very much part of the American consciousness and readily informed and influenced filmmakers and their subjects. These filmmakers included Arthur Penn, Sam Peckinpah, Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, Paul Schrader and John Milius.

Other filmmakers included Hal Ashby, Bob Rafelson and Peter Bogdavonich whose careers weren’t necessarily defined by their use of violence on screen. Yet they did experiment with screen violence in their early films. Altman was a part of these latter directors although Altman, like Sam Peckinpah and Arthur Penn, was not part of the film school generation as he had already been working in the film industry for more than a
decade and had cut his teeth in television. But again, like Peckinpah (who directed *The Wild Bunch* (1969)) and Penn (who directed *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)), Altman’s reputation was essentially “made” in the eyes of the audience and industry with *Mash* (1970).24

Other important filmmakers to mention that came out during this new wave during the mid-60s and leading into the 1970s were Sydney Pollack, Woody Allen, Irvin Kershner, George Roy Hill, John Cassavetes, William Friedkin and George Lucas. All of these filmmakers were extremely influential in the way films were produced, financed and released. They very much shaped this era of the so called “New Hollywood”. The New Hollywood era represented a radical change in cinema. Kendrick said that it got its name because Hollywood production practices, ideologies, audiences and the film themselves had changed so drastically.25

The new generation was extremely successful. Film academic Thomas Schatz said that they were able to maintain continuity and stability in an increasingly unstable and uncertain industry. Some even went so far to create their own studio to recapture the discipline, efficiency and quality control studio system. Francis Ford Coppola’s company American Zoetrope and George’s company Lucasfilm represent this development.26

Schatz also argues that these emerging filmmakers took advantage of this transitional state of the studio system, using their talents in critical, self-conscious ways, examining the assumptions and forms of commercial narrative cinema. Though it was not without its limitations as their efforts were often compromised financially because of the reformation of the studio corporations. Studio interference changed its complexion, incorporating economic pressures and the filmmakers own judgement and fears.27
Film writer and academic Robert Kolker writes that these filmmakers survived these changes to the system by ignoring or fighting it. Altman himself was part of this movement. He formed his own mini-studio Lionsgate during the 1970s which enabled him to work with a minimum of studio interference throughout the seventies. His subsequent successful career coincided with a lot of these filmmakers.

Altman had originally begun his career in Television in the 1950s, directing several episodes of *Bonanza, Alfred Hitchcock Presents* etc. He made several industrial films and documentaries but struggled to get into feature films. He directed only one during the 1950s about juvenile delinquency titled *The Delinquents* (1956). His film career never took off so he spent the next decade (1960s) working for television. It was during this time that he experimented with narrative technique, use of overpopulated characters and his infamous overlapping dialogue method which all would become staples of his later film output.

But an interesting point about Altman is that even though he was a part of this “New Hollywood” movement and his career kick-started at the same time as many of these filmmakers, he still stood out from a lot of them. The first reason being the age factor, Altman’s career only began in the late 1960s. He was well into his 40s by this stage. Most of his contemporaries were in their 20s and 30s. The second reason was that unlike his contemporaries he never went to film school and instead learned and perfected his craft when he worked in television and when he made his industrial films.

Film academic Adrian Danks states that Altman’s experiences in Hollywood and his own dissatisfaction with the Hollywood model had its origins back in the 1940s when he worked as an unsuccessful story writer. Altman himself often looks at this faltering experience in Hollywood and the time he worked in television with a certain degree of
dismissiveness and disdain. Although these experiences were more than just mere prelude to his later mature work. Working in the hyper industrialized, explicitly commercial and streamlined world of television and corporate filmmaking provided a central influence upon his approach to genre, narrative and technological innovation throughout his career. Also his reliance on formulas which allowed for improvisation, variation and completely wilful digression.\textsuperscript{29}

“There are two basic interlocking textual strategies that mark the cinema of Robert Altman. A panoramic form which encompasses multiple characters and stories and centre around a particular event, space or institution (\textit{Nashville [1975]}, \textit{Short Cuts [1993]}, \textit{Kansas City [1997]}). A revisionist form which interrogates, critiques and pays homage to the genres and archetypes of classical Hollywood cinema (\textit{The Long Goodbye [1973]}, \textit{Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull’s History Lesson [1976]}, \textit{The Player [1992]}).”\textsuperscript{30}

It is not surprising to discover that Altman’s career in Hollywood in the late 1960s had an extremely rocky start. When he was finally was hired to direct his first feature film *Countdown* (1968), a low budget science fiction film that was made at Warner Bros, his working methods and maverick style tendencies enraged Jack Warner so much that it led to Altman being removed as director from that film. His next feature was a suspense film *A cold day in the park* (1969). Both films met with lukewarm response from both critics and audiences.

Then came *Mash* (1970), Altman’s first major success and a film which put him on the map in Hollywood. *Mash* (1970), loosely based on the novel of the same name by Richard Hooker, was a satirical black comedy set during the Korean War. It follows the exploits of medical personnel stationed at a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital in Korea. It particularly focuses on two surgeons Hawkeye Pierce (played by Donald Sutherland) and Trapper John McIntyre (played by Elliot Gould).

The rights to the novel were bought by producer Ingo Preminger who then took it to 20th century Fox. Ring Lardner Jr. was hired by Preminger to adapt it. Altman was not the first choice to direct. Preminger had offered it to about twelve or thirteen directors (who all turned it down) before offering it to Altman. Altman had been struggling to get a break in the film business and now through a large degree of serendipity, he was offered a film which would become his first big break in films and lead to a (for the most part) very successful career.

But making the film was not without its difficulties during the various production stages. Altman himself said the film wasn’t released, it escaped. From the very moment Altman was hired there were tensions. An example of this centred on Donald Sutherland who was
hired to be act in the film before Altman was. According to Sutherland himself in the documentary “the Story of Mash” when Altman signed on to direct he was totally against Sutherland playing the role of Hawkeye and tried to get him fired and when he was not successful at that he tried to get his billing changed because Altman wanted the film to headline Elliot Gould. Sutherland further stated that both he and Elliot Gould were not as loose as Bob and his team were. Sutherland had come from a more disciplined theatrical space and had found Altman’s methods of encouraging improvisation extremely difficult and unorthodox.31

Sutherland and Gould would never say the same things twice, on a close up they would say one thing, medium shot they would say something else. Sutherland famously said that both he and Gould felt that Altman should be committed to an institution for the mentally unbalanced for the good of the film because he was crazy in the way he worked. This was Sutherland’s first big break as an actor in Hollywood. This film put him on the map as much as it did Altman. It is not surprising that Sutherland became one of the very few actors to work with Altman only once in his lifetime. In contrast to Elliot Gould who did apologise to Altman and would go on to became one of Altman’s major leading men in the 1970s.

At the time when Altman was offered Mash (1970), he was working on another project which was a farcical comedy with a range of characters about World War Two flyers titled The Chicken and the Hawk. He had trying to put it together for about five years but in the end realised that he would never be able to get it done as he was not very well known at the time. Altman had read the novel and was not been a fan of it. When he first read the screenplay, he thought it was dreadful and felt it wouldn’t work as a film, but felt that if he could do the same kind of thing in the Mash project that he had been trying to
do for so many years in *Chicken and the Hawk*, then he felt like he could direct *Mash* (1970).

Altman used Ring Lardner’s script merely as a springboard. Altman, who felt that because the film was an ensemble piece set in a war time medical unit, said that “we should be in the middle of all this and it shouldn’t be this clean, precise dialogue driven film”. He was looking for as much improvisation as he could get. This caused some tension with Lardner as he felt that Altman had his say about the script before the shooting started. Lardner jokingly claimed that whenever he would appear on the set, Altman would hurriedly look for the script. Lardner famously disliked the film and felt like he had been double crossed. Though he did go on to win the academy award for best adapted screenplay he always felt that he shouldn’t have won it but didn’t say anything about Altman.32

According to producer Richard Zanuck who was the head of Fox at that time, Altman had meticulously dug up those personalities and embellished the screenplay to a great degree and added a lot of zing and kick.21 When casting the film, Altman went to San Francisco where he witnessed a lot of Theatre of the Absurd. He hired about twenty actors from that genre experienced in interactive stage work to be in the film. Many of these actors were unknown and had never acted in film before. In order to get them into the film, there had to be a corresponding name such as Charlie in the script otherwise the Studio wouldn’t hire them. So Altman went through the script and gave names to all the characters he wanted and put one or two lines for each of them. Then when it actually came to casting, the Studio would say “Ok, we’ve got to hire somebody for this role and Altman would say he has to be in every scene. This was a method that Altman had used in television in order to have extras whom he could dialogue with. In this way Altman was able to find his way into the Studio system. Altman was in no position to attract star names but this
got him headed towards this ensemble work which became a staple of some of Altman’s most celebrated films.  

While Altman did appear to have a very rocky relationship with his actors, as shooting progressed they (and the crew) began to get a better idea of how Altman’s wild vision was taking shape. Altman began to win the trust of his suspicious stars. Sutherland states eventually said that it while it was chaotic, it was chaotic under the umbrella of his vision. Sally Kellerman who played Hot Lips (which landed her an Oscar nomination) said it was all very seemingly spontaneous and stated that “there just doesn’t seem to be any fear on the set with Bob”.  

While Altman seemed to have gained the respect from the actors, he still had to contend with the Studio. Unsurprisingly because of his methods his reputation had built up concerns among the Studio throughout production. He did try to keep the Studio interference to a minimum by not drawing attention to the production. There were two other war productions being financed by Fox at that time. They were Tora Tora Tora (1969) (which was about the Japanese war) and Patton (1970) (which was the European War). These films were big movies for the Studio and Mash was essentially a drive in commodity. To avoid drawing attention while making the film, he would be careful not go over budget. The fact that it was shot on a soundstage and not on location added to this. Altman himself said that while making the film, “we just hid out at the backlot of Fox”.  

When making the film, Altman also chose to make a subtle anti-commentary about the Vietnam War. Although the novel and the film are set in the Korean War of the1950s, the anti-establishment sentiment of the novel was kept and lends itself to be interpreted as a statement about Vietnam. Altman added his own touches to make this interpretation more
inviting to viewers such as an updating of the clothing, hairstyles and references from the 1950s to the 1960s. Altman does not overtly mention Vietnam in the film but does cleverly open it up to interpretation and encourage the conclusion through the subtle changes, playing off young people’s anti-war sentiments at that time. Altman was able to make an anti-Vietnam, anti-war film without making any drastic changes to the novel and more importantly he was able to do it without showing any gunfire or battle between the troops. Although the result of these battles are shown in the operating scenes.

Altman completed the film three days ahead of schedule and nearly a half a million dollars under budget but his battles with the Studio were only just beginning. It was during the post production stage that they began to pay more attention and when they saw what he was up to, tempers began to flare. Altman started to get reports back that it was the worst thing that Fox has done and they were not going to release it. Altman was dispirited by this response but not undeterred and made the necessary changes. The big one was the addition of the loud speaker which was not in the original cut and was added in editing. It served as a clever transitional device between scenes and provided a certain cohesiveness to what could have been just a flat, episodic and chaotic mishmash of cinematic chaos.

The other difficulty occurred over the operating scenes which the Studio wanted to be taken out as they were doubtful over the unprecedented mixture of comedy and carnage. They also feared that audiences would just throw up when they saw them. Altman’s response to this was famously “Well there goes our picture if they do that. Then we have a snivelling insignificant comedy.” Altman refused and stood firm along with producer Ingo Preminger. Fox reluctantly agreed to leave the film as it was. After all of these battles, *Mash* was finally going to be seen by the movie going public. The film had a preview which took place in San Francisco in September 1969. It went extremely well,
better than Altman, Preminger and Fox could have expected. They loved the film according to Fox executive Richard Zanuck.39

For its official release which took place in January of 1970, the talk was really high and the streets were filled with people at the entrance trying to get in. It was a scorching success and earned about 80,000,000 dollars at the box office. It was hailed as a landmark film. It resonated with audiences (especially young audiences) and critics because of the parallels between the Korean War and Vietnam at the time. It also gave new meaning to the word irreverence. The film garnered five nominations including best picture and best director, winning one for best screenplay (mentioned earlier). The success of the film led to a hit TV series of the same name which lasted for eleven seasons, eight years longer than the actual Korean War.40

*Mash* is an important film for Altman because not only did it launch him as an A list director in the 1970s, it epitomized what he was about as a filmmaker in terms of his style - the wide angle Panavision compositions and overlapping dialogue.

The film had a tough, absurdist edge and set new standards for contemporary filmmaking not just in terms of Altman’s production methods but also for its melding of cruelty, violence and humour.41 The film also marked other features of which Altman was famous for (and would subsequently carry over into many of his films) which was his use of satire and his revisionist examination of traditional Hollywood genres and to which old conventions were undermined, subverted and deconstructed.42
Chapter 3: Altman 1970s - Success and Challenge

*McCabe and Mrs Miller* (1971) proved to be Altman’s next important film. Financed by Warner Bros, the film was his revisionist take on the classic western genre. Based on the novel *McCabe* by Edmund Naughton, the story centres on a two bit gambler named John McCabe (played by Warren Beatty) who arrives in a North West Presbyterian Town where he establishes a makeshift brothel and becomes business partners with a British cockney Constance Miller (played by Julie Christie) after she tells him that she could run the brothel for him more profitably. This partnership proves hugely successful and they eventually open a more upmarket establishment. On the surface, the film resembles a western, but it was really an anti-western because it ignores the standard western conventions that were seen in most Hollywood Westerns up to that point. In the film the location is the Pacific North West rather than the South West, in the finale there is a shoot-out, without witnesses, and there is an anachronistic soundtrack by Leonard Cohen.

The film eschews the landscapes and the romanticism of famed director John Ford’s films. From the beginning of the film, the outskirts of the town of Presbyterian Church come into view, with a church in the centre background. It is evident that this image of the church contrasts dramatically with John Ford’s frontier. As the story unfolds we are not presented with a displacement of wilderness with a garden as the wild-west becomes civilized (imagery both shown and verbalized in Ford’s classics *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and *The Man who shot Liberty Valance* (1962), but rather a chaotic and violent melange of unenviable characters.  

The film is indebted to Howard Hawks for its subdued atmospheric lighting (courtesy of cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond). This is certainly reminiscent in Hawks’ film *El Dorado* (1966). Hawks’ western *Rio Bravo* (1959) is another example which again
disregarded the traditional standards of a western, many of which were trademarks of John Ford’s films. According to Tag Gallagher “Hawks’ deracinated characters roam free morally and ideologically. No rules bind, no institutions guide, society does not exist, social problems do not exist. Hawks’ heroes are committed to their work, but they are adolescents using their skills to test their courage rather than craftsmen whose work has value in itself.” Friendship doesn’t bind and you mind your own business. In *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (1971) as in Hawks’ westerns, there is a marginalization of the lead characters. Altman takes it a step further in this film and presents a darker view of it. Constance Miller is a prostitute and addicted to opium (and doesn’t a have heart of gold). The character of McCabe thinks he is in control but he is a conniving gambler at heart (the anti-hero). The finale is reflective of this as it famously shows McCabe to be afraid of his pursuers during the final shoot out and then his eventual demise (a staple of most revisionist westerns).

Gallagher points to the contrasts between the landscapes of both Hawks’ and Fords’ westerns. In Hawks’ westerns, the landscape is an empty plain whereas in Ford’s it is a “Monument valley where rock formations like Greek Temples or Roman ruins signal eternal verities—there is nothing to influence people.”

According to noted film critic Professor Emmanuel Levy *McCabe and Mrs Miller* was hugely successful (both critically and commercially) when it first came out and that most critics praised the film for “innovative format, inventive approach in debunking some prevalent Western myths and its atmospheric effects” In his own review he writes the film is “an elegiac, cynical, revisionist, anti-western boasting top notch performances from Warren Beatty and Julie Christie”. He further states that right after the commercial success of *Mash*, “Altman took advantage of his elevated status to make a more personal, stylized and contemporary western which demonstrated his vivid mastery of details and
images.” At the time of the film’s release, Altman told the press, “I just wanted to take a very standard western story with a classic story line and do it real or what I felt was real and destroy all myths of heroism”.47

The film came out at an important time in Hollywood when filmmakers (again because of the Vietnam War) began to question the Western genre and its messages, they began to use the Western genre to revise and express their critical views of representation such as the depiction of women, native Americans, violence and its impact and its promotion of a false ideology of manhood, heroes and the landscape. All these factors played an important part in the revising the Western genre which had existed in Hollywood for years up to that point.

Clint Eastwood (who was already an established western star at this point) was concerned with these issues and addressed them in The Outlaw Josey Wales (1976) and even more so in his Oscar winning film Unforgiven (1992), (based on an original screenplay by David Webb Peoples, written in the 1970s). The latter film according film critic Leonard Maltin was a “powerful examination of morality and hypocrisy of the old west and the impact of killing and being killed.” 48

Other filmmakers, contemporaries of Altman which come to mind in terms of this revisionist approach are Sam Peckinpah (The Wild Bunch) and Arthur Penn (Little Big Man), (both mentioned earlier) and also George Roy Hill (Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969)) and Don Siegel (The Shootist (1976)). The latter film mentioned was John Wayne’s last starring film.

McCabe and Mrs Miller’s influence can be seen in contemporary Western films such as Quentin Tarantino’s Django Unchained where the regional western presents your typical western cinema tropes while set in a-typical setting.49
Tarantino’s most recent film *The Hateful Eight* (2015) with its snow setting recalls the wintery landscapes of the Pacific Northwest in *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (1971) shot in rainy West Vancouver and Squamish, British Columbia. This setting again doesn’t show your typical Western landscape. Also Altman’s use of widescreen compositions (again courtesy of Vilmos Zsigmond) to create the right mood and atmosphere fascinated Tarantino to the point that he wanted to make his snow western completely in widescreen.  

Altman’s early successes with these two films (*McCabe and Mrs Miller and Mash*) understandably led to him forming his own studio Lionsgate in 1971. This formation enabled him to be his own producer on many of his films (*3 Women* (1977), *A Wedding* (1978)) throughout the 1970s up until 1981 when it collapsed.

Altman’s revisionist approach on a particular genre was not always successful with audiences and critics. This certainly the case with his film *The Long Goodbye* (1973) which was Altman’s revisionist take on the Film Noir genre. Financed by United Artists and adapted from the novel of the same name (by Raymond Chandler) by Leigh Brackett. Set in 1970s Los Angeles, it centred on his famous detective Philip Marlowe’s (played by Elliot Gould) involvement with mysterious woman (Nina Van Pallandt), her alcoholic husband (Sterling Hayden), evil doctor (Henry Gibson), missing pal (Jim Bouton) and Jewish Gangster (Mark Rydell).

According to Lawrence Webb in his book *The Cinema of Urban Crisis*, Altman explicitly draws on the traditions of iconography of film noir, arguably the quintessential Los Angeles genre. His tactic was to transpose Philip Marlowe intact from the 1950s into contemporary 1970s Los Angeles. Altman himself famously said that we are going to call him Rip Van Marlowe. It’s as if he has been asleep for twenty years and woken up and
was wandering through the 1970s landscape but trying to invoke the morals of the 1950s. The film revises the genre by internally staging a sense of contradiction between Hollywood formats and the present suggesting that the contemporary city would be impossible to represent without the use of mythologies, narratives and clichés. Unlike Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974) which recreates a perfectly stylized image of 1930s Los Angeles, *The Long Goodbye* (1973) self-consciously produces a detached sense of the past in the present or the co-existence of modes of production and types of space. But it is not a nostalgia film nor does it attempt to deny any existence of the modern World.  

While *The Long Goodbye* was ambitious in its construct, this approach ultimately garnered a negative response from critics at the time of its release. Many were polarized by Altman’s take and didn’t know what kind of film he was attempting to make. The performances were praised but many (critics) felt he was just doing a parody of that genre. Film critic Leonard Maltin who said in his review for his movie guide that the film was a “strange, almost spoofy updating of Chandler’s novel” and while he did praise the film for its nice touches (particularly John Williams’ jokey score) he felt that that Altman’s overall approach to the genre bordered on contempt.  

Jay Cocks said in his review for *Time Magazine* that “Altman’s lazy haphazard putdown is without affection or understanding, a nose-thumb not only at the idea of Philip Marlowe but at the genre that his tough-guy-soft-heart character epitomized. It is a curious spectacle to see Altman mocking a level of achievement to which, at his best, he could only aspire.”  

Critics have been more kind over the years and even more so when it got released on DVD and it is now regarded as a cult classic. Another film worth mentioning in terms of Altman’s so called failed revisionist approaches is another western that he made a couple of years later titled *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976). Like Altman’s earlier classics *Mash* (1970) and especially
McCabe and Mrs Miller (1971), the film featured a strong ensemble cast Paul Newman, Geraldine Chaplin, Burt Lancaster, Harvey Keitel. He criticizes and satirizes Western conventions which are now are deemed to be anachronistic and purport this false, idealized view of American heroism. The film was seen as a failure, as again critics said it was overly satirical and heavy handed, not to mention overlong. Altman, in his defence, did have heated arguments with equally difficult producer Dino De Laurentiis throughout production and had to make a compromised film. In the end, he disliked the film that was shown in theatres.

Nashville (1975) proved to be even more successful than Mash (1970). The film is a brilliant mosaic of American life set in country music capital of Nashville. It is seen through the lives of 24 characters during the town’s political rally. It is considered by critics to be Altman’s masterpiece certainly of the 1970s. It is pure Altman, the ensemble cast (considerably increased), the use of the zoom lens, overlapping dialogue and brilliant use of widescreen.

The origins of Nashville (1975) started with the studio United Artists who had offered Altman a script which they had been developing about country music which Altman rejected. Altman was still fascinated by this concept and hired Joan Tewkesbury, who worked with him previously on McCabe and Mrs Miller (1971) and Thieves Like Us (1974), to work on the script. She went her down to Nashville to research the project and kept a little diary for observations, many of which ended up in the film (the opening crashing of vehicles). Altman said that her diary was the script. United Artists hated the script and refused to finance it. 55

Altman then took the script and couldn’t find anybody willing to take it on. At this point he had developed a reputation for being difficult. Studios had labelled him a pain in the
Eventually he was introduced to a producer named Jerry Weintraub. Weintraub was just starting out in film and when Altman told him the story, he was instantly hooked. Weintraub was able to find investors at ABC and gave Altman the two million he needed to make this film.\textsuperscript{56}

When making the film, Altman said that his objective and modus operandi was that the film was to “take this country western culture and place it in a panorama which was reflective of American sensibilities and American politics”.\textsuperscript{57} Nashville (1975) succeeded and continues to resonate to this day because of its successful and seamless mixture of original musical comedy (the actors wrote their own songs for the film), sharp political satire, and compellingly poignant human drama.

Altman’s last notable film of the 1970s was 3 Women (1977) which could be described as Altman’s take on the surrealist genre as he had conceived the film from a dream he had much like Dali and Bunuel. The film was a brilliantly moody, improvisational, psychological examination of the bizarre relationships between three women living in underpopulated California desert town. Altman’s later films failed to connect with audiences or critics and had subsequently lost considerable amounts of money at the Box Office.
Chapter 4: Career downturn, revival and final years (1980-2006)

Despite not being entirely successful during this period, Altman still managed to prove to be one of the most innovative filmmakers of the last 30 years. But by the end of the 1970s he stumbled badly with *A Wedding* (1978), *Quintet* (1979), and *A Perfect Couple* (1979). He then made the political satire *H.E.A.L.T.H* (1980) and the musical *Popeye* (1980), both of which were savaged by critics.

The latter films were key for Altman as they represented and marked Altman’s career downturn during the 1980s. *Popeye* (1980) based on the popular cartoon series titled *Popeye the sailor man* by Max Fleischer was in many ways a misfire for Altman. Altman again tried to put his stamp on a particular genre. In this case, curiously enough, a 1930s cartoon. He also attempted to make a musical comedy which was another misguided attempt as the songs featured didn’t sound like real songs and the script was unfunny.

While it did feature a strong cast (Robin Williams’ first feature), was set in a Malta location. Several highly regarded people within the entertainment industry were involved – such as the producer Robert Evans (*Chinatown*) the screenwriter Jules Feiffer (*Carnal Knowledge*) and Harry Nilsson (who wrote the “songs”). The film was heavily criticized by critics and marked a low point in Altman’s career. Pauline Kael of the *New Yorker* said the film was “cluttered, squawky and eerily unfunny” and declared that “Altman’s live action literalisation of comic book slapstick dumb and oddly unpleasant.”

Altman’s approach to a cartoon series and his unsuccessful attempts at tackling and revising other different genres (musical and comedy) was overly heavy handed and ultimately boring and alienating for critics and audiences alike.

Altman made the film for Paramount and Disney (who distributed the film internationally as part of a two picture deal with Paramount). It was offered to him by producer Robert
Evans who also was the head of Paramount. Jules Feiffer was hired to write the script. Before hiring Altman, Evans cast a young Robin Williams (who was already known to audiences as the alien Mork in the TV show *Mork and Mindy* (1978-1982)) in the title role. Feeling it might be a good money maker, Altman accepted and wasted no time in making it an “Altman” film. The film was shot in Malta in early 1980 and was plagued with production problems. It went over budget and over schedule costing somewhere in the range of 20 million. 59

*Popeye* (1980) appeared to be Altman’s own *Heaven’s Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980). The two films were released within less than a month of each other. The film (like *Heaven’s Gate*) was another unconventional take on a familiar American icon. While Cimino was revising the western (albeit not as successfully as Altman did in *McCabe and Mrs Miller*), Altman applied his own free-form narrative style to *Popeye*. 60

*Popeye* was released in December and to say that the film was a complete financial disaster for Altman would be incorrect as the film did manage to make its money back but was nowhere near the blockbuster that Disney and Paramount (who released the film internationally and domestically respectively) had anticipated. It put Altman’s career in the slump coupled with the fact that he eventually lost control of his studio Lionsgate shortly after the release of *Popeye*. This was due in part the tumultuous production of that film and of *H.E.A.L.T.H* (1980), an ensemble parody and satire on the political scene of that time. Altman had a deal with 20th Century Fox to distribute his films which were financed by his Lion’s Gate production company and despite the support of Alan Ladd Jr. he was already in trouble with them after the commercial failure of his last three films mentioned earlier. 61
He therefore rushed H.E.A.L.T.H (1980) into production as quickly as possible fearing that the studio would pull the plug on his financing. The film was shot in early 1979 and Altman wanted the film to have wide release before the Presidential campaign but Alan Ladd, his champion at 20th century Fox left the company in a management shakeup and the film was initially shelved. Test screenings which were held in April 1980 in San Francisco, Sacramento, Houston and Boston went very badly. Norman Levy, the new Fox Studio Head, said that the audience response was the poorest he’d ever witnessed. Fox ultimately deemed the film to be uncommercial for release and put it back on the shelf.  

Altman was furious with Fox (except for Sherry Lansing who loved the film) and had a major fallout with them over the way they handled H.E.A.L.T.H. After completing Popeye (1980) he tried to contact Norman Levy who, according Altman, just ignored him. He further said that “Norman Levy and the rest are scum and that they're not interested in movies. They're only interested in ski lifts and Coca-Cola.”  

Undeterred Altman took it upon himself to distribute the film. He brought the film to a number of festivals. This exposure prompted the Studio to hold out for another round of preview screenings in Los Angeles. These previews were just as bad (if not worse) than the previous ones and they decisively prohibited a national screening. Altman finally conceded that the film was a lost cause. It was a disappointing association for both parties involved: Altman’s reputation had suffered badly and Fox had lost around 10 million dollars which included the earlier flops which Altman had directed. It’s not surprising that Altman and Fox both went their separate ways shortly after.  

Because of the financial disputes of Popeye and also the collapse of Lone Star which was to be his next film for United Artists, Altman was forced to put his company Lion’s Gate on the market. He eventually sold it to independent producer Jonathan Taplin (known for
his collaborations with Scorsese (*Mean Streets* (1973) and *The Last Waltz* (1978) for 2.3 million dollars.  

The 1980s proved difficult for several veterans of the so-called New Hollywood, specifically those identified as Art Cinema Directors (Scorsese, Coppola). The Hollywood blockbuster (Lucas and Spielberg) had huge impact on theatrical and video markets during this period and Altman had found it increasingly difficult to find work. As he himself said in a 1981 article for the *New York Times* about his changed relationship with Hollywood.

“Suddenly no one answered my phone calls, I had no place to turn. I feel my time has run out. Every studio wants *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). The movies I want to make are movies the studio don’t want. What they want to make, I don’t.”

Altman was deemed to be difficult and unreliable when handling big budget films and this ultimately was the reason why Hollywood refused to work or have anything to do with him in the 1980s. With not much other options, Altman began to express interest in non-studio projects for cable television and home video and began directing a period of live theatre productions. These productions lead Altman to directing a number of films in the 1980s that were basically just photographed plays. They were, a film version of *Come Back to the 5 and Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982), an adaptation of *Streamers* (1983), an adaptation of David Rabe’s drama about soldiers in Vietnam, *Secret Honour* (1984), a one man character play about Richard Nixon and *A Fool for Love* (1985), written by and starring Sam Shepard. All were made independently or for television and all met with either lukewarm responses or little financial returns.

Altman had attempted to get back in to the Hollywood realm but was unsuccessful. He had shot the teen comedy *OC and Stiggs* in 1985 for MGM but it was ultimately shelved.
for two years and it opened in 1987 to a negative reception critically and commercially. Altman eventually relocated to Europe and lived in Paris for a time where he shot another play adaptation, the comedy *Beyond Therapy* (1987) and also contributed to the British Anthology Opera Film *Aria* (1987). These projects also met with negative response all round.

He returned to the States a few years later and worked mainly on TV making mostly uneven productions. In 1988 he made the mini-series *Tanner 88* for Home Box Office. It was an experimental comedy about a presidential campaign produced and broadcast during the actual 1988 election campaign. This project was notable and exceptional as it became Altman’s most critically acclaimed work of the 1980s and it earned him an Emmy award for best director. 69

The 1990s was a revitalization for Altman as it marked his return to form and reintroduction to the world of mainstream critical prominence with hits like *The Player* (1992) and *Short Cuts* (1993). But that’s not to take away from the more ambitious longer form works like *Tanner 88* and also the film *Vincent and Theo* (1990). The latter film is a biographical drama exploring the relationship between Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh and his younger brother Theo. Altman had originally shot the film as a four hour mini-series which aired on television. He and screenwriter Julian Mitchell pared it down to two and half hours for a theatrical release. It was released by the independent studio Hemdale. The film was mostly a critical success with critics and audiences and paved the way for Altman to get back into the mainstream.70

Both projects (*Tanner 88* and *Vincent and Theo*) are important, not just because did they both played a part in revitalizing Altman’s career, because they explored key thematic preoccupations (party politics, the cultural industries, artistic expression) which have
absorbed Altman for most of his career. These projects along with Altman’s other works of the 1980s demonstrated Altman’s capacity for stretching himself, exploring formal parameters and finding new avenues for artistic expression. Nevertheless it was The Player (1992) and Short Cuts (1993) which finally enabled and established a celebration of Altman once again as being an interesting and innovative filmmaker working within and on the margins of Hollywood cinema.\textsuperscript{71}

*The Player* (1992) was a biting Hollywood satirical comedy about a studio executive named Griffin Mills (Tim Robbins) who starts receiving death threats which he thinks are from an aspiring screenwriter whose pitch he rejected. But instead of going to the police he decides to take the law into his own hands.

The film features a famous opening tracking shot of the studio where Griffin works which lasts for 7 minutes and 47 seconds. It is an affectionate homage to Orson Welles’ classic film noir *A Touch of Evil* (1958) which also featured a phenomenally long take at its beginning. Other interesting comparisons to Welles was Altman’s placement of the camera at below eye level and uses of mock heroic composition to make the viewer realise that Griffin looks uncannily like the young Citizen Kane.\textsuperscript{72}

Altman owes a lot to Fine Line Features as they were the company who released the film. Fine Line Features were a specialty films division of Independent Studio New Line Cinema. New Line had established Fine Line in 1990 to go beyond the conventional classics division model of the 1980s. New Line had perceived this model as an organisation that only acquired foreign films which had limited potential. Instead they were interested in establishing a specialty label that would trade in films with much more cross-over potential than classic oriented films and still make a considerable profit. Steven Soderbergh’s hit debut feature *Sex Lies and Videotape* (1989) which was financed
by Miramax (another independent studio) was an important example as it was instrumental in the beginning of the 1990s independent film boom.73

Under Ira Deutchman’s (Fine Line’s first senior executive) supervision, Fine Line took specialty filmmaking to the next level with more commercially oriented movies compared to low key, low budget movies of the 1980s. But at the same time would still turn out low budget films which if properly distributed could make a substantial profit and could allow for substantial profit margins. This was the case with New Zealand filmmaker Jane Campion’s An Angel at my Table (1990) which was the first film to be released by Fine Line in the U.S. The film was extremely well received and won numerous awards in New Zealand and also at various film festivals all around the world. Other low budget films from Fine Line were naturally soon to follow domestically and internationally. Notable examples include Peter Medak’s Let Me have it (1991), Hal Hartley’s Trust (1991), Gus Van Sant’s My Own Private Idaho (1991) and Michael Tolkien’s The Rapture (1991).74

After only a year of existence, Fine Line was moving into more commercial fare, targeting broader audiences and creating in house facilities to plan the advertising of its releases more effectively. While many of its non U.S films boasted certain commercial elements, it became clear that Fine Line could handle a more commercial film with a big budget. The Player (1992) was exactly the property they were looking for. The film was written by The Rapture writer-director Michael Tolkien and was based on the novel of the same name also written by himself.75 At that time Altman was trying to get Short Cuts (1993) financed. He was offered The Player merely because he was a director for hire. He agreed to do film partly to get the money required to make Short Cuts.

The film’s principal financial backer (and original distributor) was Avenue Pictures who had financed Drugstore Cowboy (1989). But they withdrew from distribution while the
film was in production. Fine Line acquired the film in February 1992 just two months before it was released and convinced New Line that this was a movie for them, obtaining the rights to distribute it for 1.5 million. Fine Line’s marketing campaign focused on Altman’s return to form and status as an outsider who therefore had the appropriate credentials to critique Hollywood. The film opened to considerable buzz in April and did great box office business for a film on limited release.76

Many critics praised the film for its satire, in particular its cunning humour, sharpness and cynicism which on the whole didn’t really offend anyone. It also got huge praise for its numerous film references and Hollywood insider jokes replete with around sixty Hollywood celebrities agreeing to make cameo appearances in the film. Roger Ebert said in his review for The Chicago Sun Times that “Altman’s The Player which tells Griffin’s story with cold sardonic glee is a movie about today’s Hollywood – hilarious and heartless in about equal measure, and often at the same time.”77

The success of The Player gave Fine Line enormous visibility, making it a very attractive option for filmmakers in the U.S and around the world. They were able to strike a number of deals with companies and producers. The film undoubtedly put Robert Altman back on the map and its success enabled him to make his long awaited pet project Short Cuts (1993).78 Short Cuts was a return of sorts for Altman as it was very much on the vein of his early classics from the 1970s (Mash, Nashville). It is an ensemble film, a mordent mosaic of misery, a three hour soap opera of unpleasant, unhappy lives in Southern California based on the writings by Raymond Carver. Not too dissimilar in what he did in the earlier classics, he paints on an oversized canvas with a series a marginally interconnected vignettes about various couples, parents, lovers and friends played by a virtual who’s who of contemporary talent with the expected Altman touches (overlapping dialogue, zoom lenses, widescreen) peppered throughout. 79 Altman here though is taking...
the ensemble film to whole other level. The film is sprawling and ambitious in its construct. Over a full three hours, Altman skilfully and successfully integrates his disparate characters and episodes into a funny, heartrending and emotionally rewarding whole.

The film was another critical and commercial success and within the space of a couple of years, Altman’s reputation was quickly reaffirmed and solidified with these two films and the efforts of Fine Line features for the way they distributed and marketed these films. He notoriously followed up *Short Cuts* with the awfully messy *Ready to Wear (Pret a Porter)* (1994) which he made with another independent studio Miramax. It was another ensemble, alleged satirical comedy film about the fashion industry in Paris. The film was neither a hit nor a critical success with critics and audiences

Altman’s later and final films unfortunately had a somewhat overall uneven response from critics and audiences. There were some exceptions to this, *Gosford Park* (2001) which was to be his last great film. The film was Altman’s take on the mystery thriller “who done it” set in the British country estate with his typical large ensemble cast, this time mostly made up of the who’s who of British Cinema. It was a clever mixture of the period British television series *Upstairs Downstairs* (1971-1981) and the American comedy mystery film *Clue* (1985). It also provides a perceptive, highly nuanced social commentary on the upper class and the class of the servants. The film was written by Julian Fellowes (later to create the period drama television series *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015)) who expertly combines a plethora of plot strands and weaves them all into elaborate tapestry of intrigue, social satire and brittle social commentary which Altman brilliantly translates replete with his own style and sensibilities onto the screen. The result is *Gosford Park*, a masterful combination of an Agatha Christie “who done it” and an ensemble piece produced by Robert Altman. The film did excellently critically and
commercially gaining several awards including the academy award for best screenplay for Fellowes and nominations worldwide.

Altman only made two more films following Gosford Park. His last film A Prairie Home Companion (2006) which was another ensemble film about the behind scenes activities of the long running radio show of the same name. It opened in to mostly positive reviews and moderate box office success. Altman won the lifetime achievement at the 2006 Academy Awards. Sadly only several months after this and release of A Prairie Home Companion, Altman died on November 20th 2006. The always prolific Altman was naturally still developing other projects right up until his death.
Chapter 5: Conclusion – influence and legacy

Altman was hugely influential and helpful to a number of notable filmmakers throughout his career. Filmmakers such as Alan Rudolph who was Altman’s friend and protégé in the 1970s and worked as an assistant director on The Long Goodbye and Nashville and eventually became a successful director in his own right. His relationship with Altman lead to Altman producing a number of Rudolph’s films over the years most notably Welcome to L.A (1976). It is obvious that Rudolph was inspired by Altman’s method of telling the personal stories of an ensemble of quirky and neurotic characters over a sprawling canvas. The film is notable as it was Rudolph’s first big success and put him on the map as a director. Rudolph, like his mentor is an iconoclastic filmmaker who revels in subverting traditional genres and this is reflected in all of his best work. A clear example of this is Rudolph’s film Mrs Parker and the vicious circle (1994). Rudolph was struggling to get the film financed until Altman stepped in as producer and used his clout to persuade Fine Line Features and Miramax (the two studios he was making films for at that time) to team up with the former, releasing the film domestically and the latter releasing it internationally. 

Altman has also been widely seen as a major influence on contemporary independent directors of the 1990s and early 2000s. Important examples include Quentin Tarantino, Paul Thomas Anderson (both mentioned earlier), also Wes Anderson, Alejandro Gonzales Inarritu and Paul Haggis. One cannot watch Paul Thomas Anderson’s Magnolia (1999) without being reminded of Altman’s work, especially Nashville and Short Cuts. These films are “sprawling multi-stranded narratives which focus on an array of characters and are resolutely mature works by directors interested in people, their lives, emotions and interactions with others as well as dramatic potential of random incidents of chance and fate.” Short Cuts clearly inspired Magnolia because again of their similar core ideas.
including the central one which is the mosaic of misery idea and the denouements. “The denouements of *Short Cuts* and *Magnolia* hinge on elemental or even biblical events with an earthquake and a downpour of frogs.”  

Anderson, by his own admission, has been equally influenced by Altman and respectful of him which Altman recognized and was grateful for. This is highlighted during the making of *A Prairie Home Companion*. In order to receive insurance for the shooting of this film, Altman hired Anderson as a backup director in case Altman was incapable of directing the film.

Altman has influenced film in many ways through his manipulation of sound either by toning it down or by overlapping. He famously refined the ensemble film which had existed in Hollywood at least since *Grand Hotel* (1932). Altman loosened and expanded this genre where the plot often gets lost and the film meanders so that the film becomes a documentary-like depiction of people’s lives in flux. This influence is seen in the films of Paul Thomas Anderson (*Boogie Nights*) and in the films of Tarantino (*Pulp Fiction* (1994), *The Hateful Eight* (2015)). Inarritu whose film *Amores Perros* (2000) is an ensemble film set in Mexico, and Paul Haggis whose film *Crash* (2006), like *Magnolia*, is an overt homage to Altman because of its large ensemble cast. The latter film is interesting as it somewhat inexplicably managed to accomplish something that Altman’s films never did which was to win the academy award for best picture.

Wes Anderson has also been heavily influenced by Altman’s films down through the years. The distinct handling of widescreen compositions, zoom lens and the ensemble genre are all among the ingredients associated with Wes Anderson (*The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), *The Life Aquatic of Steve Zissou* (2004), *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014)) and one could argue were unimaginable without the impact of Robert Altman’s technique. When speaking about Altman’s influence, Anderson said
“His whole approach, his whole method of filming was designed to capture spontaneous moments that he could then shape and organize later. What he was really interested in, from actors anyway, were the accidents and what he doesn’t shape, where he just steps back and lets something grow. But at the same time I think he was probably also very much a kind of conductor. So it’s not controlling, but nevertheless guiding and shaping to the same effect… So maybe that’s what all art does.”

It is clear that Altman’s maverick streak made him the director that he was. He was not afraid to experiment and not afraid to fail. He railed against the commercialism of Hollywood. He stayed true to the vision he wanted to create. It is clear that he made enemies through this process but he also made very loyal and lifelong friends who assisted him. He was also a major influence in the film world. His innovation and techniques were taken up and adapted by the next generation of film makers and his influence can be seen in other films which were deemed to be major successes. He mostly used the same actors in his films and it seems that his way was to build relationships with them and that is one of the reasons his successful films were so successful.

Ron Mann’s documentary Altman (2014) effectively illustrates Altman’s importance as an artist and how he still stands as a major contributor to the history of film. Altmanesque, the adjective, is used in the documentary to variously describe the artist and the way he worked. The word is equated with “fearless”, “making your own rules”, “kicking Hollywood’s ass” and “expect the unexpected”. His filmic output speaks for itself but his treatment of different genres and their subversion provided new and exciting modes of expression in film that has not been contemplated or attempted up to that point. The Independent Spirit Robert Altman Award was inaugurated in 2008 and is dedicated to independent filmmakers. It is a fitting testament in recognition of Altman’s achievements, contribution and support of creative and innovative filmic endeavours.
End Notes


Bibliography


Filmography

A cold day in the park (1969)
A Fool for Love (1985)
Altman (2014)
Amores Perros (2000)
An Angel at my Table (1990)
A Perfect Couple (1979)
A Prairie Home Companion (2006)
Aria (1987)
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Rio Bravo (1959)
The Royal Tenenbaums (2001)
Secret Honour (1984)

Sex Lies and Videotape (1989)

Short Cuts (1993)

The Shootist (1976)

Streamers (1983)

There will be blood (2007)

Thieves like us (1974)

3 Women (1977)

Tora Tora Tora (1969)

Trust (1991)

Unforgiven (1992)

Vincent and Theo (1990)

Welcome to L.A (1976)

The Wild Bunch (1969)

Winchester 73 (1950)
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The rights granted to the College under this Deposit Agreement are non-exclusive. Nothing in this Deposit Agreement shall prevent you from publishing your Work(s) in its/their present or future version(s) elsewhere and, unless an agreement exists to the contrary, no ownership is assumed by the College when storing such Work(s).

2. GRANT OF LICENCE
2.1 By depositing your Work(s) to the Repository, you (the “Depositor”) hereby grant to the College a non-exclusive royalty-free worldwide perpetual licence under the Work(s) to:

(a) publish, display and make copies of the Work(s) openly and freely available in electronic format via any medium;
(b) store, translate, copy, migrate, re-format or re-arrange the Work(s) to ensure its/their future preservation within the lifetime of the Repository and to ensure that the Work(s) can continue to be made freely available (e.g., in the event of technology changes or the obsolescence of file formats); and/or
(c) incorporate metadata or documentation into public access catalogues for the Work(s). Citations to the Work(s) will remain visible in the Repository during its lifetime.
For the purposes of clause 2(a) above, the Work(s) shall be made available for non-commercial purposes only and subject to the terms of the Creative Commons Licence regime (End User Licence Agreement), unless otherwise specified by the copyright holder.

2.2 Except for the rights and licences expressly granted herein, no other licences are granted by implication, estoppel or otherwise.

3. ADDITIONAL RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE COLLEGE 3.1 The College:
(a) reserves the right to remove the Work(s) from the Repository at any time;
(b) shall not be under any obligation to reproduce, transmit, broadcast or display the Work(s) in the same format or software as that in which it was/they were originally created and/or deposited;
(c) shall not be under any obligation to take legal action on behalf of the Depositor or other rights holders in the event of breach of intellectual property rights or any other right in the Work(s); and
(d) may share, whether internally or with third parties, usage statistics giving details of numbers of downloads and other statistics.

3.2 While every care will be taken to preserve the Work(s), the College shall not be liable for loss or damage to the Work(s) or associated data while it is stored within the Repository.

4. DEPOSITOR DECLARATION
The Depositor hereby declares and warrants to the College that:
(a) it is the owner of the copyright in the whole Work(s) (including content and layout) or is duly authorised by the owner(s), or other holder(s) of these rights;
(b) it has all necessary authority to enter into this Deposit Agreement and to grant the rights and licences clearly contemplated by this Deposit Agreement;
(c) the Work(s) is/are original and does not, to the best of the Depositor’s knowledge, information and belief, infringe the copyright or other rights of any other person or party, nor does it/do they contain libellous or defamatory material; and
(d) neither the execution and delivery of this Deposit Agreement nor the performance by the Depositor of any of its obligations hereunder, nor the consummation of any of the transactions contemplated hereby will to the best of the Depositor’s knowledge, information and belief, violate or conflict with any agreement to which the Depositor is a party or may otherwise be bound.

5. GENERAL
5.1 Any questions in relation to this Deposit Agreement should be directed to the library esource@dbs.ie.
5.2 This Deposit Agreement shall be governed by the laws of Ireland.

Please sign this deposit agreement electronically [type your name in the field below] and keep a copy for your own file.

Signature: Seán Durack
Date: 29 May 2016

Contact details:
(Email address): Seanpdurack@hotmail.com