

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

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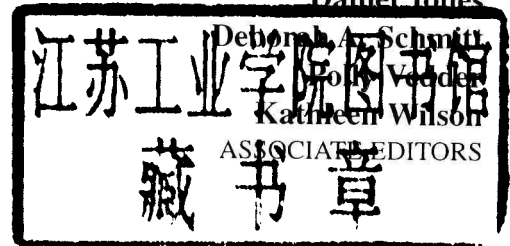
Volume 116

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

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Preface

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Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

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- A brief **Biographical and Critical Introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the criticism. The first line of the introduction provides the author's full name, pseudonyms (if applicable), nationality, and a listing of genres in which the author has written. To provide users with easier access to information, the biographical and critical essay included in each author entry is divided into four categories: "Introduction," "Biographical Information," "Major Works," and "Critical Reception." The introductions to single-work entries—entries that focus on well known and frequently studied books, short stories, and poems—are similarly organized to quickly provide readers with information on the plot and major characters of the work being discussed, its major themes, and its critical reception. Previous volumes of *CLC* in which the author has been featured are also listed in the introduction.
- A list of **Principal Works** notes the most important writings by the author. When foreign-language works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets.
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- Critical essays are prefaced by **Explanatory Notes** as an additional aid to readers. These notes may provide several types of valuable information, including: the reputation of the critic, the importance of the work of criticism, the commentator's approach to the author's work, the purpose of the criticism, and changes in critical trends regarding the author.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** designed to help the user find the original essay or book precedes each critical piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- A concise **Further Reading** section appears at the end of entries on authors for whom a significant amount of criticism exists in addition to the pieces reprinted in *CLC*. Each citation in this section is accompanied by a descriptive annotation describing the content of that article. Materials included in this section are grouped under various headings (e.g., Biography, Bibliography, Criticism, and Interviews) to aid users in their search for additional information. Cross-references to other useful sources published by The Gale Group in which the author has appeared are also included: *Authors in the News*, *Black Writers*, *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Discovering Authors*, *Drama Criticism*, *Hispanic Literature Criticism*, *Hispanic Writers*, *Native North American Literature*, *Poetry Criticism*, *Something about the Author*, *Short Story Criticism*, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, and *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*.

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- A **Cumulative Nationality Index** alphabetically lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by numbers corresponding to the volumes in which the authors appear.
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- In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **Special Paper-bound Edition** of the *CLC* title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of the index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index: it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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²Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967); excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: Gale, 1995), pp. 223-26.

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Robert Altman

1925-

American filmmaker.

The following entry presents an overview of Altman's career through 1996. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volume 16.

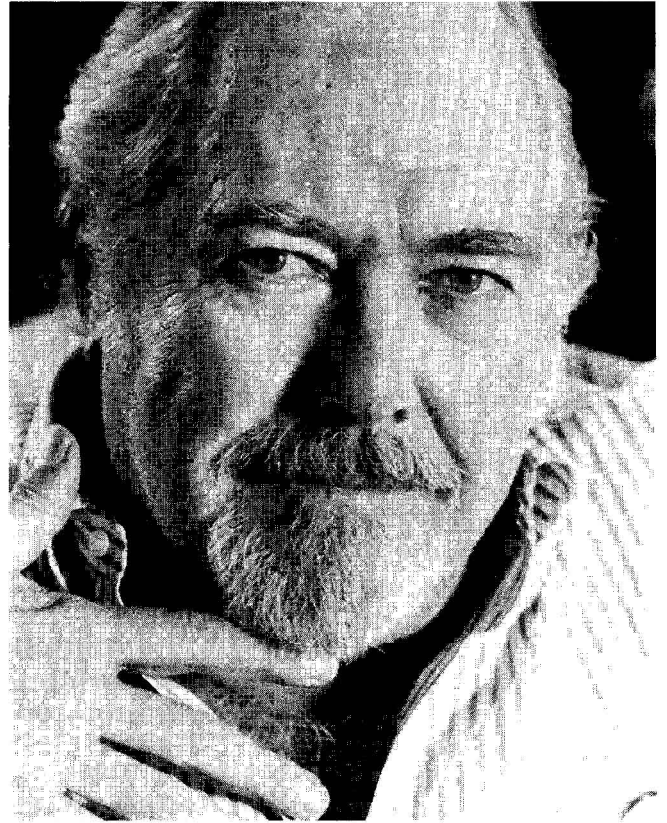
INTRODUCTION

Robert Altman enjoyed both critical acclaim and commercial success with his film *M*A*S*H* in 1970, but he is known more for his cult following than for his box office smashes. His signature techniques, including multiple voices, meandering plots, and obscure themes, have garnered him critical acclaim for his innovation, but have prevented him from gaining overwhelming popular success.

Biographical Information

Altman was born February 20, 1925, in Kansas City, Missouri, to German immigrant parents. He attended several schools in the Kansas City area, including Wentworth Military Academy, before entering the Air Force to become a co-pilot of B-24 bombers. In the 1940s and 1950s Altman wrote several B-movie screenplays in Los Angeles and then returned to Kansas City to direct documentaries. In the late 1950s Altman tried his luck in Hollywood once again, this time in television. For the rest of the 1950s and much of the 1960s, Altman wrote, produced, or directed episodes of popular shows such as *Bonanza*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, and *U. S. Marshall*. His first feature film was *Countdown* (1968), but he was not allowed final editing decisions on the film. Although many consider *Countdown* a fine science fiction film, Altman disavows the movie and has insisted on complete artistic control of his subsequent projects. Altman was chosen to direct his breakthrough feature, *M*A*S*H* (1970) after several (according to some reports, as many as fifteen) directors turned the project down. After *M*A*S*H*, Altman made a series of offbeat films that received mixed critical reception and were by no means commercial successes. Altman's *Nashville* (1975) brought the auteur back into Hollywood's good graces for a time, garnering Altman the New York Film Critics Circle awards for best film and best director, as well as multiple Academy Award nominations. Altman experienced a third resurgence in 1992 with *The Player*, another commercial and critical success for which Altman was again nominated for multiple Academy Awards.

Major Works



*M*A*S*H* is an anti-war film centered on a group of zany army doctors who, though compassionate and skilled surgeons, survive the war through alcohol and humor. Set during the Korean War but released during the Vietnam War, the black comedy contains many of the elements typical of Altman's other films, including improvised lines and scenes, overlapping dialogue and sound effects, light and irreverent humor, no standard plot, and a moving camera which records from a distance. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) is a western and love story that subverts many of the conventions of each. In *The Long Goodbye* (1973), based on the Raymond Chandler novel, Altman tackles the detective genre and one of its mythical heroes, the detective Philip Marlowe. Marlowe is out of place in his 1970s surroundings, enabling Altman to make a social commentary on the times. *Nashville* (1975) analyzes the nature of power and opportunism. The story revolves around a cast of 24 characters, mostly singers, aspiring stars, and politicians in the capital of country music. *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976) criticizes commercialism, opportunism, and the making of a celebrity. The title itself sets up a dia-

lectic between two versions of history, and the film makes it difficult to discern historical fiction and historical reality. *Vincent and Theo* (1990) is Altman's only biographical film. Altman takes the unusual approach of making Vincent Van Gogh's art peripheral to the main plot. Instead, the film traces Van Gogh's relationship with his brother Theo and the pain he suffered in his life. *The Player* (1992) is a satiric look at the Hollywood studio system and the role writers play in the system. *Short Cuts* (1993) is another sweeping film with multiple plot lines and a large cast of characters. The film is based on slice-of-life stories by Raymond Carver. *Ready to Wear* (1994) follows another multitude of characters, this time through the fashion world. The film analyzes many topics, including the nature of womanhood, relationships in American society, and the human condition.

Critical Reception

Much disagreement surrounds the critical discussions of many of Altman's films. *M*A*S*H* was Altman's breakout film, becoming both a critical and popular success. Many of the techniques which made *M*A*S*H* popular, however, left critics and audiences uneasy in his subsequent films. Many reviewers criticize Altman's use of sound and overlapping dialogue; others assert that the technique lends a sense of reality to his films. Altman's *The Long Goodbye* created a storm of criticism, but several reviewers attribute this to Altman's alteration of the end of the Raymond Chandler novel, which made Marlowe devotees uncomfortable. *Nashville* was another critical and popular success for Altman, but his style still drew complaints. Some critics felt that despite Altman's finesse in juggling multiple story lines, *Nashville*'s separate plots lacked substance individually. Most reviewers agree that plot is not the central element in Altman's work. Jonathan Baumbach asserted that "Altman generates tension in his film not through plot, which seems to exist as an afterthought . . . , but through movement and image." Despite individual criticisms of some of his techniques, many reviewers appreciate Altman's unique and innovative style. While he has failed to achieve consistent box office success, many critics and fans describe him as one of the best directors of his generation. Todd Boyd asserts that, "Altman remains one of the few independent voices in a sea of repetitive Hollywood mediocrity."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- The Delinquents* [writer and director] (screenplay) 1955
The James Dean Story [writer and director] (documentary) 1957
Nightmare in Chicago [director] (film) 1967
Countdown [director] (documentary) 1968
That Cold Day in the Park [director] (film) 1969

- M*A*S*H* [director; adapted from the novel by Richard Hooker] (screenplay) 1970
Brewster McCLOUD [writer and director] (screenplay) 1970
McCabe and Mrs. Miller [with Brian McKay; writer and director] (screenplay) 1971
Images [writer and director] (screenplay) 1972
The Long Goodbye [director; adapted from the novel by Raymond Chandler] (screenplay) 1973
Thieves Like Us [with Calder Willingham and Joan Tewkesbury; writer and director] (screenplay) 1974
California Split [writer and director] (screenplay) 1974
Nashville [director] (film) 1975
Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson [with Alan Rudolph; writer and director] (screenplay) 1976
Three Women [writer and director] (screenplay) 1977
A Wedding [with John Considine, Patricia Resnick, and Allan Nicholls; writer and director] (screenplay) 1978
Quintet [with Frank Barhydt and Resnick; writer and director] (screenplay) 1979
A Perfect Couple [with Nicholls; writer and director] (screenplay) 1979
Popeye [director] (film) 1980
Come Back to the 5 and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean [director] (film) 1982
Health [with Barhydt and Paul Dooley; writer and director] (screenplay) 1982
Streamers [director] (film) 1983
Fool for Love [director] (film) 1985
Beyond Therapy [with Christopher Durang; writer and director] (screenplay) 1987
Vincent and Theo [director] (film) 1990
The Player [director] (film) 1992
Short Cuts [with Barhydt; writer and director; based on the short stories of Raymond Carver] (screenplay) 1993
Ready to Wear [also known as *Prêt-à-Porter*; writer and director] (screenplay) 1994
Kansas City [with Barhydt; writer and director] (screenplay) 1996
The Gingerbread Man [director; based on an original story by John Grisham] (film) 1998
Cookie's Fortune [director] (film) 1999

CRITICISM

Jonathan Baumbach (review date 1974)

SOURCE: "Show-Offs," in *Partisan Review*, Vol. XLI, No. 2, 1974, pp. 273-74.

[In the following mixed review, Baumbach complains that, "what's finally wrong with *The Long Goodbye* is that for all its artistic pretensions, all of them, the film is not quite

serious, not serious enough to carry the freight of its pretensions."]

Seeing movies, writing about them is a more subjective business than the authoritative voice of most reviews admits. One runs into a good deal of self-deception and cant among reviewers who try to make the fleeting reality on the screen seem unequivocal. There is so much fantasy invested in moviegoing that movie reviews tend to tell us more about the reviewer than the reviewed.

This is prelude to saying that Robert Altman's odd version of Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, which has many incidental virtues, disappointed me and that my disappointment may have as much to do with false expectations as with the weaknesses of the film. The movie I witnessed didn't so much demythify the private eye, as reviewers advertised, as offer him to us as something else altogether—a version of the Elliott Gould persona, a wisecracking, crude, and shy New York Jew displaced in a futuristic California. Updating the Chandler novel to the seventies, Altman's *The Long Goodbye* is an exercise in self-revealing style, a showcase for the director's impressively eccentric cinematic manner.

Gould's Philip Marlowe is one of those devious schlemiels who fends off vindication by pretending to be less formidable than he is (or secretly thinks he is). Although he seems ineffectual and vulnerable for a man in his profession, Gould's shamus is cool under pressure (as cool as any of his Marlowe predecessors) or, depending on how you want to read him, oblivious to the world outside him. The wisecrack helps him to keep his distance from others and, more importantly, from his own feelings. Living alone with his cat, seemingly uninterested in women, this Philip Marlowe leads a lonely, empty, and violated life. Yet since the Gould character (like the movie as a whole) has an improvised quality, we don't really believe that Marlowe has an existence beyond the moment of the film. Altman makes us aware that we are watching Elliott Gould impersonating an unlikely, mumbling private eye—everyone mumbles in an Altman film—comically out of step with the world he pretends to inhabit. Gould wears a fifties vintage bar mitzvah suit and drives a forties vintage Lincoln. Altman's attitude toward his protagonist as toward his material in general seems to me loosely defined, and what's finally wrong with *The Long Goodbye* is that for all its artistic pretensions, *all* of them, the film is not quite serious, not serious enough to carry the freight of its pretensions.

The visual richness of *The Long Goodbye* and the exhilarating, tricky ending in which Gould's Marlowe kills his one-time friend, Terry Lennox, leads one to expect more from the work than it actually delivers, which may further explain my dissatisfaction. Most impressive about Altman's distinctive film, even more impressive than its sharply observed

detailing of a dehumanized California, is the work's elaborately sustained rhythm. Altman is a master of a highly controlled frantic pace as if some volcanic nightmare of chaos (or hysteria) were just below the surface of his world, threatening to explode. Altman generates tension in his film not through plot, which seems to exist as an afterthought (you almost feel copies of the Chandler novel ought to be given out to the audience in advance), but through movement and image. *The Long Goodbye* is a disturbing and abrasive experience—Altman's best film to date, two hours of variations on his signature, a highly subjective and private work.

Michael Dempsey (essay date September-October 1974)

SOURCE: "Altman: The Empty Staircase and the Chinese Princess," in *Film Comment*, Vol. 10, No. 5, September-October, 1974, pp. 10-17.

[In the following essay, Dempsey discusses pivotal scenes in Altman's *Thieves Like Us* and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* which cause the films to fall short of greatness.]

Two moments in Robert Altman's movies may hold the key to their true nature. In one, the conclusion of *Thieves Like Us*, travellers in a railroad station climb a staircase to a train. The film goes into slow motion, and Father Coughlin gives a populist speech on the sound track. Finally, the people disappear, leaving only the stairs. In the other, an episode of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, a few cardplayers have heard that a contingent of whores on its way to the remote Northwestern town of Presbyterian Church includes one Oriental woman. Some declare that she is an "authentic Chinese princess" who, like all others, is deliriously sexual. Others scoff, but one man clinches it with a story about a friend who paid five dollars to find out, "and it's true."

Most American directors, when they have a multi-megaton hit like *M*A*S*H*, try to detonate a series of still bigger blockbusters. Instead, Altman has made a group of offbeat, personal films which explore the genres—fantasy, Western, psychological melodrama, thriller, romance—that they nominally inhabit. *Brewster McCloud* throws its bird-boy hero into hard, gleaming Houston instead of yellow-brick Oz. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* turns a straightforward Western into a wispy mirage. *Images* makes us lose our bearings inside the mind of a schizophrenic woman. Philip Marlowe is bemused and dreamy in *The Long Goodbye*, lost in a city and a crime too labyrinthine for him to understand until too late. *Thieves Like Us* almost totally denies us the kiss kiss bang bang that we expect from stories of lovers on the run.

These thumbnail sketches probably explain the commercial