

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC 242**

Volume 242

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

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



THOMSON  
★  
GALE





## Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 242

**Project Editor**

Jeffrey W. Hunter

**Editorial**

Dana Barnes, Tom Burns, Elizabeth Cranston,  
Kathy D. Darrow, Kristen Dorsch, Jelena O.  
Krstović, Michelle Lee, Thomas J. Schoenberg,  
Noah Schusterbauer, Lawrence J. Trudeau,  
Russel Whitaker

**Data Capture**

Frances Monroe, Gwen Tucker

**Indexing Services**

Laurie Andriot

**Rights and Acquisitions**

Margaret Abendroth, Beth Beaufore, Sara  
Teller

**Composition and Electronic Prepress**

Gary Oudersluys

**Manufacturing**

Cynde Bishop

**Associate Product Manager**

Marc Cormier

© 2008 Thomson Gale, a part of The Thomson Corporation. Thomson and Star Logo are trademarks and Gale is a registered trademark used herein under license.

**For more information, contact**

Thomson Gale

27500 Drake Rd.

Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

Or you can visit our internet site at  
<http://www.gale.com>

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

No part of this work covered by the copyright herein may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution, or information storage retrieval systems—without the written permission of the publisher.

This publication is a creative work fully protected by all applicable copyright laws, as well as by misappropriation, trade secret, unfair competition, and other applicable laws. The authors and editors of this work have added value to the underlying factual material herein through one or more of the following: unique and original selection, coordination, expression, arrangement, and classification of the information.

For permission to use material from the product, submit your request via the Web at <http://www.gale-edit.com/permissions>, or you may download our Permissions Request form and submit your request by fax or mail to:

**Permissions Department**

Thomson Gale

27500 Drake Rd.

Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

Permissions Hotline:

248-699-8006 or 800-877-4253, ext. 8006

Fax 248-699-8074 or 800-762-4058

Since this page cannot legibly accommodate all copyright notices, the acknowledgments constitute an extension of the copyright notice.

While every effort has been made to secure permission to reprint material and to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, Thomson Gale neither guarantees the accuracy of the data contained herein nor assumes any responsibility for errors, omissions or discrepancies. Thomson Gale accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

**LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132**

ISBN-13: 978-0-7876-9566-8

ISBN-10: 0-7876-9566-1

ISSN 0091-3421

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Preface

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, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors 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.

### Scope of the Series

*CLC* provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

### Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

## Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *CLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in other Literature Criticism series.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this 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.

## Citing Contemporary Literary Criticism

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language As-

sociation (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a bibliography set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

Miller, Mae. "Patterns of Nature and Confluence in Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*." *Southern Quarterly: A Journal of the Arts in the South* 35, no. 1 (fall 1996): 55-61. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 220, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 304-09. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006.

Aronoff, Myron J. "Learning to Live with Ambiguity: Balancing Ethical and Political Imperatives." In *The Spy Novels of John le Carré: Balancing Ethics and Politics*, 201-14. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 220, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 84-92. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a works cited list set forth in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 5th ed. (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

Miller, Mae. "Patterns of Nature and Confluence in Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*." *Southern Quarterly: A Journal of the Arts in the South* 35.1 (fall 1996): 55-61. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 220. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006. 304-09.

Aronoff, Myron J. "Learning to Live with Ambiguity: Balancing Ethical and Political Imperatives." *The Spy Novels of John le Carré: Balancing Ethics and Politics*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. 201-14. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 220. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006. 84-92.

## **Suggestions are Welcome**

Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Associate Product Manager:

Associate Product Manager, Literary Criticism Series  
Thomson Gale  
27500 Drake Road  
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535  
1-800-347-4253 (GALE)  
Fax: 248-699-8983

## Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank the copyright holders of the criticism included in this volume and the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reproduction rights. Following is a list of the copyright holders who have granted us permission to reproduce material in this volume of *CLC*. Every effort has been made to trace copyright, but if omissions have been made, please let us know.

### **COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *CLC*, VOLUME 242, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING PERIODICALS:**

*American Cinematographer*, v. 87, June, 2006. Copyright © 2006 ASC Holding Corp. Reproduced by permission.—*American Literature*, v. 74, December, 2002. Copyright © 2002 Duke University Press. All rights reserved. Used by permission of the publisher.—*Antigonish Review*, v. 114, summer, 1998 for “Under-reading Urquhart, Horwood, and Rumi” by Judith Maclean Miller. Copyright © 1998 by the author. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—*Arizona Quarterly*, v. 55, summer, 1999 for “Faux Post-Humanism, or, Animal Rights, Neocolonialism, and Michael Crichton’s *Congo*” by Cary Wolfe. Copyright © 1999 by the Regents of the University of Arizona. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—*Canadian Literature*, v. 179, winter, 2003. Reproduced by permission.—*Cineaste*, v. 27, summer, 2002; v. 28, summer, 2003. Copyright © 2002, 2003 by Cineaste Publishing Inc. Both reproduced by permission.—*Commonweal*, v. 129, February 8, 2002; v. 133, May 10, 2006. Copyright © 2002, 2006 Commonweal Publishing Co., Inc. Both reproduced by permission of Commonweal Foundation.—*Critique*, v. 45, December, 2004. Copyright © 2004 by Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation. Reproduced with permission of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation, published by Heldref Publications, 1319 18th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-1802.—*Essays in Criticism*, v. 55, 2005 for “Muriel Spark’s Caricatural Effects” by Ian Gregson. Copyright © 2005 Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. Republished with permission of Oxford University Press, conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., and the author.—*Essays on Canadian Writing*, v. 71, fall, 2000; v. 79, spring, 2003; v. 81, winter, 2004. Copyright © 2000, 2003, 2004 Essays on Canadian Writing Ltd. All reproduced by permission.—*Études Canadiennes/Canadian Studies*, v. 44, 1998; v. 53, December, 2002. Both reproduced by permission.—*Film Comment*, v. 24, June, 1988 for “Tanner & 88: For Real is for Now” by Richard T. Jameson; v. 37, November-December, 2001 for “Graham Fuller on Robert Altman’s Latest Return to Form” by Graham Fuller. Both reproduced by permission of the respective authors./v. 42, May-June, 2006 for “It Don’t Worry Me” by Kent Jones. Copyright © 2006 by the Film Society of Lincoln Center. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the author./v. 30, March, 1994 for “A Lion’s Gate: The Cinema According to Robert Altman” by Kathleen Murphy. Copyright © 1994 by the Film Society of Lincoln Center. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the publisher.—*First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, v. 153, May, 2005. Copyright © 2005 Institute on Religion and Public Life. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—*Fleet Owner*, v. 95, December, 2000. Copyright © 2000 Penton Media. All rights reserved. Reprinted with the permission of Penton Business Media.—*Freeman*, v. 56, January-February, 2006. Copyright © 2006 Foundation for Economic Education, Inc., www.fee.org. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—*International Fiction Review*, v. 33, January, 2006. Copyright © 2006 International Fiction Association. Reproduced by permission.—*Issues in Science & Technology*, v. 22, winter, 2006. Copyright © 2006 by the University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX. Reprinted with permission.—*January Magazine*, June, 2001. Reproduced by permission.—*Journal of College Science Teaching*, v. 34, July-August, 2005. Republished with permission of National Science Teachers Association, conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.—*Journal of Film and Video*, v. 52, summer, 2000 for “Troubled Masculinity and Abusive Fathers: Duality and Duplicity in *The Gingerbread Man*,” by Robert T. Self and Terry F. Robinson. Copyright © 2000 by the University Film and Video Association. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the respective authors.—*Journal of Gender Studies*, v. 9, November, 2000 for “Seduction, Simulacra and the Feminine: Spectacles and images in Muriel Spark’s ‘The Public Image’” by Fotini Apostolou. Copyright © 2000 Taylor & Francis Ltd. Reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis, Ltd., <http://www.informaworld.com>, and the author.—*Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, v. 13, 2003 for “Horrifying Boredom in Michael Crichton’s Fictions” by James Whitlark. Reproduced by permission of the author.—*The Journal of Narrative Theory*, v. 36, summer, 2006. Copyright © 2006 by The Journal of Narrative Technique. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—*National Observer*, autumn, 2005. Copyright © 2005 Council for the National Interest. Reproduced by permission.—*New Criterion*, v. 24, May, 2006 for “Notes & Comments: Muriel Spark, RIP” by New Criterion. Copyright © 2006 by The Foundation for Cultural Review. Reproduced by permission.—*The New Republic*, v. 234, March 20, 2006; v. 235, July 3, 2006; v. 235, December 25, 2006. Copyright © 2006 by The New Republic, Inc. All reproduced by permission of *The New Republic*.—*New Statesman*, v. 136, January 8, 2007.

Copyright © 2007 New Statesman, Ltd. Reproduced by permission.—*Quarterly Journal of Speech*, v. 81, August, 1995 for “The Firm, the Park, and the University: Fear and Trembling on the Postmodern Trail” by G. Thomas Goodnight. Reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis, Ltd., <http://www.informaworld.com>, and the author.—*Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*, v. 54, winter, 2002; v. 57, summer, 2005. Copyright © 2002, 2005 Marquette University Press. Both reproduced by permission.—*Scottish Studies Review*, v. 2, autumn, 2001. Reproduced by permission of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies and the author, Abdel-Moneim Aly.—*Sight & Sound*, v. 17, January, 2007; v. 17, February, 2007; v. 17, March, 2007. Copyright © 2007 by The British Film Institute. All reproduced by permission.—*The Spectator*, v. 287, October 20, 2001; v. 296, October 2, 2004. Copyright © 2001, 2004 by *The Spectator*. Both reproduced by permission of *The Spectator*.—*Studies in Canadian Literature*, v. 24, 1999. Copyright by the author. Reproduced by permission of the editors.—*Studies in Short Fiction*, v. 33, summer, 1996. Copyright © 1996 by Newberry College. Reproduced by permission.—*Textual Practice*, v. 19, 2005 for “Hearing them Speak: Voices in Wilfred Bion, Muriel Spark, and Penelope Fitzgerald” by Lyndsey Stonebridge. Copyright © 2005 Taylor & Francis. Reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis, Ltd., <http://www.informaworld.com>, and the author.—*Victorian Review*, v. 21, 1995. Copyright © University of Toronto Press 1995. Reproduced by permission of University of Toronto Press Incorporated.—*Village Voice*, v. 51, November 29-December 5, 2006. Copyright © 2006 Village Voice Media, Inc. Reprinted with the permission of the *Village Voice*.—*Women’s Review of Books*, v. 24, January, 2007. Reproduced by permission.—*Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, v. 33, December, 2004 for “Interview with Dame Muriel Spark” by James Brooker and Margarita Estévez Saá. Copyright © Taylor & Francis Inc. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, <http://www.taylorandfrancis.com>.—*World Literature Today*, v. 81, January-February, 2007. Copyright © 2007 by *World Literature Today*. Reproduced by permission of the publisher.

#### **COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN CLC, VOLUME 242, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING BOOKS:**

Bölling, Gordon. From *Refractions of Germany in Canadian Literature and Culture*. Edited by Heinz Antor, Sylvia Brown, John Considine and Klaus Stierstorfer. Berlin, New York. Walter de Gruyter, GmbH & Co., 2003. Copyright © 2003 by Walter de Gruyter & Co., D-10785 Berlin. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Compton, Anne. From “Romancing the Landscape: Jane Urquhart’s Fiction,” in *Jane Urquhart: Essays on Her Work*. Edited by Laura Ferri. Guernica Editions, Inc., 2005. Reproduced by permission.—Gallardo-Torrano, Pedro. From “Rediscovering the Island as Utopian Locus: Michael Crichton’s *Jurassic Park*,” in *Theme Parks, Rainforests, and Sprouting Wastelands*. Edited by Richard Todd and Luisa Flora. Rodopi, 2000. Copyright © 2000 Editions Rodopi B.V. Reproduced by permission.—Sudan, Rajani. From “Sexy SIMS, Racy SIMMS” in *Race in Cyberspace*. Edited by Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, Gilbert B. Rodman. Routledge, 2000. Copyright © 2000 by Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman for selection and editorial matter. Individual chapters copyright by the contributors. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Books Ltd., conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., and the author.—Trembley, Elizabeth A. From *Michael Crichton: A Critical Companion*. Greenwood Press, 1996. Copyright © 1996 by Elizabeth A. Trembley. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., Westport, CT.—Vauthier, Simone. From “The Mirror and the Window; Jane Urquhart’s ‘Forbidden Dances,’” in *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English*. Edited by Jaqueline Bardolph. Rodopi, 2001. Copyright © 2001 Editions Rodopi B.V. Reproduced by permission.



# Thomson Gale Literature Product Advisory Board

The members of the Thomson Gale Literature Product Advisory Board—reference librarians from public and academic library systems—represent a cross-section of our customer base and offer a variety of informed perspectives on both the presentation and content of our literature products. Advisory board members assess and define such quality issues as the relevance, currency, and usefulness of the author coverage, critical content, and literary topics included in our series; evaluate the layout, presentation, and general quality of our printed volumes; provide feedback on the criteria used for selecting authors and topics covered in our series; provide suggestions for potential enhancements to our series; identify any gaps in our coverage of authors or literary topics, recommending authors or topics for inclusion; analyze the appropriateness of our content and presentation for various user audiences, such as high school students, undergraduates, graduate students, librarians, and educators; and offer feedback on any proposed changes/enhancements to our series. We wish to thank the following advisors for their advice throughout the year.

**Barbara M. Bibel**

Librarian  
Oakland Public Library  
Oakland, California

**Dr. Toby Burrows**

Principal Librarian  
The Scholars' Centre  
University of Western Australia Library  
Nedlands, Western Australia

**Celia C. Daniel**

Associate Reference Librarian  
Howard University Libraries  
Washington, D.C.

**David M. Durant**

Reference Librarian  
Joyner Library  
East Carolina University  
Greenville, North Carolina

**Nancy T. Guidry**

Librarian  
Bakersfield Community College  
Bakersfield, California

**Heather Martin**

Arts & Humanities Librarian  
University of Alabama at Birmingham, Sterne Library  
Birmingham, Alabama

**Susan Mikula**

Librarian  
Indiana Free Library  
Indiana, Pennsylvania

**Thomas Nixon**

Humanities Reference Librarian  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Davis  
Library  
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

**Mark Schumacher**

Jackson Library  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
Greensboro, North Carolina

**Gwen Scott-Miller**

Assistant Director  
Sno-Isle Regional Library System  
Marysville, Washington

# Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

<b>Robert Altman 1925-2006</b> .....	1
<i>American director and screenwriter</i>	
<b>Michael Crichton 1942-</b> .....	62
<i>American novelist, screenwriter, autobiographer, and nonfiction writer</i>	
<b>Muriel Spark 1918-2006</b> .....	160
<i>Scottish poet, short story writer, essayist, and novelist</i>	
<b>Jane Urquhart 1945-</b> .....	239
<i>Canadian poet, short story writer, and novelist</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 357

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 467

CLC Cumulative Nationality Index 481

CLC-242 Title Index 497

# Robert Altman

## 1925-2006

American director and screenwriter.

The following entry provides an overview of Altman's career through 2007. For additional information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 16 and 116.

### INTRODUCTION

A versatile director and screenwriter, Altman enjoyed both critical acclaim and commercial success with several well-known films, most notably, *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970) and *Nashville* (1975). His signature techniques—multiple voices, various subplots, and obscure themes—brought him praise for his innovative approach, but also often prevented him from securing the consistent approval of mainstream audiences. Despite Altman's fluctuating reputation at the box office, his cinematic virtuosity was admired by a loyal group of film reviewers throughout his career, and he developed a cult following among moviegoers as well. In 2005 the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences recognized his outstanding contributions to the film industry with their Lifetime Achievement Award.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born on February 20, 1925, in Kansas City, Missouri, to German immigrant parents, Altman attended several schools in the Kansas City area in his youth, including Wentworth Military Academy, and later studied engineering at the University of Missouri. He also served in the Air Force as a co-pilot of B-24 bombers during World War II. In the 1940s and 1950s, Altman wrote several B-movie screenplays in Los Angeles. Failing to find success in the movie industry, he eventually returned to Kansas City, where he worked as a writer, director, editor, and cameraman for the Calvin Company, helping produce documentaries and industrial films. In the late 1950s, Altman returned to Hollywood, this time to work in television. For the rest of the 1950s and much of the 1960s, Altman wrote, produced, or directed episodes of such popular television shows as *Bonanza*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, and *U.S. Marshal*. Altman refused to take credit for his first feature film, *Countdown* (1968), because he was not allowed to make final editing decisions.

After that experience, he ensured that he had complete artistic control over his subsequent projects, and he eventually founded his own production company, Lion's Gate Productions. Altman was offered the opportunity to direct *M\*A\*S\*H*, his breakthrough film, after several other directors turned down the job. The film won the Golden Palm Award at the Cannes International Film Festival and received five Academy Award nominations. Altman then went on to write and direct several offbeat movies that generated mixed reviews and mediocre ticket sales. In 1975, however, his fortunes changed with *Nashville*, another award-winning film, which many critics consider to be his best. Altman's unswerving dedication to his personal artistic vision led him to direct several more unconventional films during the 1980s, many of which reviewers praised but audiences failed to embrace. In the 1990s, Altman experienced another resurgence in his career with *The Player* (1992) and *Short Cuts* (1993), both of which earned him Academy Award nominations for Best Director. These films were followed by the even more successful *Gosford Park* (2001), a murder mystery that earned Academy Award nominations for Best Picture and Best Director and also garnered best director awards from the New York Film Critics Circle, the National Society of Film Critics, and the Golden Globes. Altman died of complications due to cancer on November 20, 2006, in Los Angeles.

### MAJOR WORKS

Altman remains most famous for *M\*A\*S\*H*, a satiric, antiwar film that provided the basis for the long-running (1972-1983) television series of the same name. Set during the Korean War (and released during the Vietnam War), this black comedy follows a group of eccentric but talented army doctors who use humor—and alcohol—to survive the war and cope with their work in the face of frequent bureaucratic obstacles. The motion picture shares many elements in common with other Altman films, including a lack of a standard plot, improvised lines and scenes, overlapping dialogue and sound effects, light and irreverent humor, and a moving camera that records from a distance. Altman's reputation as an artistic rebel grew with his other "anti-genre" films that followed *M\*A\*S\*H*. In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), he explores the theme of American westward expansion,

showing the mythic, heroic frontiersman to be an opportunistic capitalist. In *The Long Goodbye* (1973), based on the Raymond Chandler novel of the same name, Altman subverts traditional notions of the detective story, placing Chandler's classic private eye character Philip Marlowe in 1970s Los Angeles. Set in the 1930s, *Thieves Like Us* (1974) has been viewed by critics as Altman's version of the Dust Bowl gangster drama. The film follows three convicts who escape from prison and embark on a bank-robbing spree.

It was not until *Nashville*, however, that Altman was able to recapture the commercial success he had achieved with *M\*A\*S\*H*. *Nashville* revolves around a large cast of twenty-four characters—most of whom are aspiring singers or politicians—and analyzes the nature of power and opportunism in Nashville, Tennessee, the capital of American country music. Altman followed *Nashville* with a series of less popular films, though they are notable for their expression of such trademark Altman techniques as social satire, intersecting story lines and subtexts, multilayer sound tracks, and off-balance characters. In *A Wedding* (1978), like *Nashville*, Altman utilizes a large cast, this time to expose the foibles of the *nouveau riche* in the American South. During the early 1980s, Altman directed several film adaptations of popular plays in quick succession, none of which was intended for a mainstream audience. The most memorable of these is *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982), which concerns the reunion of former members of a James Dean fan club. Altman began the 1990s with the biographical film *Vincent and Theo* (1990), which focuses on Vincent Van Gogh's obscurity during his lifetime and his emotional pain, a movie which has been seen by some critics as a parallel to Altman's own artistic struggles with Hollywood.

Ironically, the film that sparked a renaissance in Altman's later career, *The Player*, is a scathing satire of the American movie industry. Functioning as both a black comedy and a murder-thriller, *The Player* follows Griffin Mill, a self-obsessed movie executive who accidentally murders a screenwriter he thinks is stalking him, only to discover that he killed the wrong man. The film lampoons such Hollywood clichés as the power lunch, the neglected writer, and the ruthless director, among many others, and Altman fills the movie with an all-star cast of celebrity cameos, which help lend authenticity to his commentary on Hollywood's excesses. While not as commercially successful as *The Player*, Altman's next film, *Short Cuts*, received widespread acclaim from many notable film scholars and reviewers who rank it with *M\*A\*S\*H* and *Nashville* in Altman's overall canon. Inspired by the short stories of Raymond Carver, *Short Cuts* features various plot lines and another ensemble cast,

and, through the intertwined lives of his characters, Altman attempts to expose the moral bankruptcy of American society, which is shown to be excessively violent in nature. Altman extended the scope of his satire to the fashion industry with *Prêt-à-Porter* (*Ready to Wear*; 1994) before turning his attention to a group of films critical of small-town life in America, among them *Kansas City* (1996) and *Cookie's Fortune* (1999). With his last two films, *Gosford Park* and *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006), Altman once again displayed his skill at directing an ensemble cast. *Gosford Park*, a murder mystery set among a group of aristocrats and their servants at an English country retreat in the 1930s, was the more successful of the two, earning Altman yet another Academy Award nomination for Best Director. Altman's final film, *A Prairie Home Companion*, presents the fictional last broadcast of the radio show of the same name hosted by Garrison Keillor.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

While many have described Altman as one of the greatest directors of his generation, the Academy Award for Best Director eluded him throughout his career, perhaps both because of his lack of commercial appeal and his vocal disdain for the film industry itself. Critics have often disagreed in their assessments of Altman's films. *M\*A\*S\*H* established Altman's reputation in the film industry, but, oddly, many of Altman's unconventional filmmaking techniques that won praise in *M\*A\*S\*H* garnered negative reviews and low ticket sales when employed in some of his subsequent films. Certain reviewers have criticized Altman's use of sound and overlapping dialogue, while others have asserted that this technique lends a sense of reality to his films. Some have agreed with Stanley Kaufmann's declaration that Altman's films are "more an assumption of style and substance than the real things," while others have celebrated Altman's style, with Helene Keyssar, for example, asserting that the "interacting points of view" represent the "constantly shifting and interactive nature of culture and of human activities." Critics have also focused on Altman's tendency to explore different genres in his work, including the western, war film, biography, love story, and murder mystery.

Altman's use of satire has been another frequent topic of discussion among reviewers, with Keyssar observing that Altman's films "renegotiate both our detachments from and attachments to American culture. The Altman signature distinguishes itself from other filmic signatures by its attention both to the politics of representation and to the representation of culture and

politics." Many have maintained that *Nashville* stands as Altman's best film; some have even claimed that it holds a place as one of the best movies of the 1970s. As Robert T. Self has noted, "Altman's reconstruction of the traditional semantics and syntax of genre film, his critique of contemporary mores, his independence within the Hollywood production system, his indebtedness to various European cinemas, his experimentation in technique and style certified his role in the reawakening of American movies in the 1970s." Iconoclastic, at times visionary, and always willing to take risks to effect his ambitious artistic ideals, Altman produced a somewhat uneven body of work, but movie historians have almost unanimously agreed that he had a significant impact on the film culture of the late twentieth century.

---

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*The Delinquents* [writer and director] (film) 1957  
*The James Dean Story* [director, with George W. George] (documentary) 1957  
*Countdown* [director] (documentary) 1968  
*That Cold Day in the Park* [director] (film) 1969  
*Brewster McCloud* [director] (film) 1970  
*M\*A\*S\*H* [director; adapted from the novel by Richard Hooker] (film) 1970  
*McCabe and Mrs. Miller* [director; writer, with Brian McKay] (film) 1971  
*Images* [writer and director] (film) 1972  
*The Long Goodbye* [director; adapted from the novel by Raymond Chandler] (film) 1973  
*California Split* [director] (film) 1974  
*Thieves Like Us* [director; writer, with Calder Willingham and Joan Tewkesbury] (film) 1974  
*Nashville* [director] (film) 1975  
*Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* [director; writer, with Alan Rudolph] (film) 1976  
*Three Women* [writer and director] (film) 1977  
*A Wedding* [director; writer, with John Considine, Patricia Resnick, and Allan F. Nicholls] (film) 1978  
*A Perfect Couple* [director; writer, with Allan F. Nicholls] (film) 1979  
*Quintet* [director; writer, with Frank Barhydt and Patricia Resnick] (film) 1979  
*Health* [director; writer, with Frank Barhydt and Paul Dooley] (film) 1980  
*Popeye* [director] (film) 1980  
*Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* [director] (film) 1982  
*Streamers* [director] (film) 1983  
*Secret Honor* [director] (film) 1984  
*Fool for Love* [director] (film) 1985

*The Laundromat* [director] (television film) 1985  
*O. C. and Stiggs* [director] (film) 1985  
*Beyond Therapy* [director; writer, with Christopher Durang] (film) 1987  
*The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial* [director] (television film) 1988  
*Tanner '88* [director] (television series) 1988  
*Vincent and Theo* [director] (film) 1990  
*The Player* [director] (film) 1992  
*Short Cuts* [director; writer, with Frank Barhydt; based on the short stories of Raymond Carver] (film) 1993  
*Prêt-à-Porter* [also known as *Ready to Wear*; director; writer, with Barbara Shulgasser] (film) 1994  
*Kansas City* [director; writer, with Frank Barhydt] (film) 1996  
*The Gingerbread Man* [director; based on an original story by John Grisham] (film) 1998  
*Cookie's Fortune* [director] (film) 1999  
*Dr. T and the Women* [director] (film) 2000  
*Gosford Park* [director] (film) 2001  
*The Company* [director] (film) 2003  
*Tanner on Tanner* [director] (television series) 2004  
*A Prairie Home Companion* [director] (film) 2006

---

## CRITICISM

### Richard T. Jameson (review date June 1988)

SOURCE: Jameson, Richard T. "Tanner '88: For Real Is for Now." *Film Comment* 24, no. 3 (June 1988): 73-5.

[In the following review, Jameson applauds Altman's groundbreaking television series, *Tanner '88*, a satire of media-driven American presidential politics.]

#### CAMPAIGN MANAGER:

A really good TV ad helps a good candidate get better. It's not so much that they believe the ad as they aspire to it. They want the people to believe they are who they say they are. . . . That's why the Tanner campaign "For Real" has been so successful.

#### TV REPORTER:

What happened to "The Future Is Now"?

#### CAMPAIGN MANAGER:

Well, Molly, "The Future Is Now" was then, and "For Real" is now.

Robert Altman seemed to have come out of nowhere in 1970 when, as the 14th choice director on the movie *M\*A\*S\*H*, he exploded the boundaries of commercial



American filmmaking. Maybe that's why he's been so resourceful at defining his own brand of space, on-screen and off.

Tell him he doesn't fit into Hollywood and he creates his own studio (Lion's Gate). Tell him even his most faithful fans have grown exasperated with his in-house doodling (*Quintet, A Perfect Couple, Health*) and he gets Disney and Paramount to pick up the tab (*Popeye*). Close the last cinematic doors on him and he starts directing cinematic plays (*Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*)—and then turns around and makes movies of them, in super-16mm, for cable TV, public TV, anyone willing to buy a little culture on the cheap.

It sounds like a cruel comedown from the widescreen world-conquering of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Nashville*. But that was then and this is now. In point of fact, Altman's work in the Eighties represents a heroic study in survival, professionally and aesthetically. He could scarcely stop being a maverick, so he figured out a way to be a viable one.

*Tanner '88*, Altman's current project for HBO, is the latest manifestation of the director's semi-underground creativity. It's also the most exciting, and easily the most entertaining, thing he's done in the past decade. He and Garry Trudeau, of *Doonesbury* fame, decided that the vast and vapid field of Democratic contenders for the 1988 Presidential nomination had room for one more. In Altman's own words, "We created a candidate. We surrounded him with a team. We're going on the campaign trail and we're sending two cameras along to document the event we created."

*Tanner '88: The Dark Horse*, the hour-long first installment, premiered on the eve of the New Hampshire primary. Several days earlier, Jack Tanner (Michael Murphy), a former Congressman from East Lansing, Michigan, is traveling the wintry New England back roads in the company of his college-age daughter Alex (Cynthia Nixon) and an interested press corps of approximately one (Kevin J. O'Connor as a counterculture leftover named Hayes Taggerty). The locals, grown skeptical and also cheekily cozy with having their political flesh pressed, mostly can't place his name. His young staff, headed by former Kennedy team player T. J. Cavanaugh (Pamela Reed), has little more idea who he is or how best to sell him to the electorate.

The viewer is similarly unsure how to approach Tanner. Altman introduces him as a talk show guest on New Hampshire TV—more precisely, as an image on a TV monitor—where he smiles pleasantly, milks ap-

plause for being from many hometowns (he grew up an Air Force brat), and generally comes across as your standard-issue bland liberal, albeit one with a Ph.D.

He's encountered next on another video monitor, this time at Tanner headquarters, where his staff is scoping out a preposterously Mister Rogers-style campaign spot: Tanner sweeping snow off his front walk, saying "Oh hello there," then excusing himself to go inside and answer a phone that has begun to ring "off the hook" (CU of receiver rocking on desktop) with suggestions that he run for the Presidency. The spot switches to background bio, Tanner's father in World War II. "This footage looks very familiar," T. J. remarks. Deke, the video man, answers, "I lifted it from a Dole film campaign. I mean, hell, *he* lifted it from stock, right? You don't really think they sent a crew out to film a future wounded President that day?" "But Jack's father was a pilot," another staffer points out. "You better use Bush's footage!"

This sort of raillery percolates throughout the episode. However, Altman and Trudeau aren't out to create an improved version of *Washington's* Bob Forehead. Once he arrives on the scene himself, Jack Tanner begins to establish his personal legitimacy—a thoughtful, quietly ironical guy half-bemused and half-appalled at the processes of modern politicking, willing to play the electoral game but mindful of its ethical hazards and how short it falls of serving the grandeur of democracy. He's read Daniel Boorstin, and tries to share his concern about "human pseudo-events" with his staff. Then he turns around, discovers Deke filming him, and snaps off the room lights in exasperation.

And how sweet it is to contemplate a candidate, even a fictitious one, who can rag a journalist pal for theorizing about the part Jesse Jackson's bastard birth may have played in making him a compulsive achiever ("Jesus, you don't miss a Freudian freckle, do ya?"), and stay ticked enough to embellish the theme later in the day. Drinking a beer with Hayes Taggerty just before stepping over to speak at a rural barbecue, he tarries long enough to gibe, "Oh, by the way, I learned to drink to please my father whom I wanted to murder so I could then marry my mother!" Is this the Adlai Stevenson of the Eighties?

You could miss Altman's credit at the beginning of *Tanner '88* and still know immediately who made it. The main-title scene (post talk show appearance) features a camera noodling among the clutter on a semi-reflecting tabletop at Tanner HQ, catching bleary glimpses of the staffers between coffee cups and ashtrays, candidate matchbooks and Egg McMuffin boxes, while on the soundtrack several conversations

overlap and T. J. Cavanaugh holds telephonic communication with the-man-who, temporarily stranded in Durham.

Altman shoots *Tanner* [*Tanner* '88] just like an Altman movie, with one decisive exception: he's working in video, not film. Now, video is a recalcitrantly non-voluptuous medium given to glaring highlights and metallic color tones, and the sound is nowhere near Lion's Gate eight-track in quality. Yet video works for *Tanner*, maybe works better than more lushly manageable celluloid would. (The cameraman is Jean Lepine, who has assisted cinematographer Pierre Mignot on Altman's impressionistic Eighties films.) Video is the medium of the Six o'clock news; the mobile minicam is an earnest of veracity and immediacy. It accords perfectly with Altman's desires to erase the barriers between fact(oid) and fiction, to "find out what the political process is by joining it."

Altman's *Nashville* (1975) got underway with a credit sequence tricked up to resemble a hard-sell, K-Tel-style record album commercial; a lot of moviegoers were mystified because they seemed to be looking at a preview for the movie they'd already bought tickets to see. Similarly, the premiere of *Tanner '88: The Dark Horse* really began, even before the HBO Special Presentations logo hit the screen, with a combined teaser for the show and advertisement for Tanner's candidacy. I was sitting there with my finger on the VCR remote and failed to realize I should have been taping already. You never know, from one moment to the next, which way *Tanner '88* is going to be "for real."

Take those cameos by Pat Robertson, Gary Hart, and Bob Dole, all going along with the gag—each in his own smiley-apprehensive way—and swapping shop talk with candidate Tanner as their campaign trails cross. One would love to know how their participation was connived at, how ad-libbed the shooting situation was. After Robertson and Michael Murphy trade innocuous chitchat, Kevin J. O'Connor thrusts himself forward, in character as Hayes Taggerty, and pitches Robertson a curve about "playing Christian hardball" in the last days of the New Hampshire campaign. Robertson skips a beat, then hunches his shoulders and starts easing out of camera range, while delivering himself of an all-purpose riff about how his "athletic background" prepared him for that. Did Robertson know O'Connor wasn't a real journalist? Would it have mattered?

Not all the targets of opportunity appear onscreen. T. J. Cavanaugh keeps fielding phone calls from Congressman Joe Kennedy ("I don't know which way you

should vote, Joe. Ask your uncle"). At one moment—a particularly fine one for the wonderful Pamela Reed—T. J. loses her cool and sobs, "Bobby, I don't have time for this! . . . Did I say that?" There's a good deal of quotable sniping at the personalities of many real-life candidates and not a few real-life newspapers and network news divisions. Trudeau, who's married to *Today* host Jane Pauley, has written an affectionately nasty NBC news star role for Veronica Cartwright ("Hey, Molly, the committee writing your piece wants a conference call").

Two of the news people maintain a running argument about what is and isn't fair in reporting the private lives of candidates. The *Post* puts killer talent David Seidelman (Richard Cox) on the bus in Part Two, *Tanner '88: For Real* (which aired in March), after the dark horse has emerged unexpectedly strong from New Hampshire. Hayes Taggerty, the only press person who is aware that divorcé Jack Tanner is enjoying occasional overnights with a lady friend, rebukes Seidelman for his role in deep-sixing Gary Hart: "People like you took one of the best politicians of his era and turned him into a side show in the supermarket media." In the next half-hour segment, *Tanner '88: Night of the Twinkies* (April), Seidelman is allowed a measure of self-justification: "These people make their own choices; all we can do is react. . . . These guys, each of them, want to be *the* most powerful person on the planet. That means right away we're not dealing with well-adjusted here. We're dealing with obsession. . . . The stakes are just too high."

Robert Altman's own obsessions are honored in *Tanner '88*. Political satire like this is fraught with peril, tempting a showman like Altman toward the sort of glib, sophomoric put-down to which he has often shown himself susceptible. Mostly, he and fellow wise-guy Trudeau have been avoiding the temptation, and even when they don't, they put such a bright spin on their wickedness that it's easy to forgive them. But Altman at his best—and a lot of *Tanner* is Altman at his best—is such a loving master of his medium that he transcends limitations, in his material and in himself. He isn't just taking satiric potshots. Here and there, as in T. J.'s Bobby Kennedy faux pas, or Michael Murphy's magnificent, impromptu five-minute monologue that brings *The Dark Horse* to a finely refracted close, he glimpses authentic mystery: what people want, what they gather themselves into nations to have, what they sometimes forget they need so desperately.

HBO initially contracted for the first two hours' worth of *Tanner '88* and has given Altman and Trudeau the nod for eight more episodes: two half-hours per month, May through August. So far, nothing fatal has oc-

curred in the actual, ongoing campaign to leave the fictional candidate looking ridiculous by his air date. But in a development Altman must relish, the making of this limited series for television has taken on all the jeopardy of the campaign itself. What kind of lead time will they have for each episode? What will they do? And how in the pluperfect hell are they ever going to do it? *Tanner '88* could end up being the best thing to come out of this presidential year.

**Kathleen Murphy (essay date March 1994)**

SOURCE: Murphy, Kathleen. "A Lion's Gate: The Cinema according to Robert Altman." *Film Comment* 30, no. 2 (March 1994): 20-8.

[In the following essay, Murphy examines Altman's metaphorical use of imagery throughout his films, commenting that, "Altman's greatest gift is his genius for images that can be critically framed, but resist being frozen into stopmotion significance."]

Why do you imagine golden birds?  
Do you not see how the blackbird  
Walks around the feet  
Of the women about you?

—"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" by Wallace  
Stevens

In Provence, Vincent Van Gogh centers his easel in a field of glorious sunflowers. Robert Altman's camera darts about frantically, catching closeups of golden novae and overviews of entire restless constellations. Neither the director nor the painter can settle on framespace; like some sorcerer's apprentice, nature has generated a vertiginous profusion of forms, each potentially unique flower a momentary stop in a grid of pulsing yellow light. Finally, Van Gogh surrenders to chaos, smearing black pigment over his empty white canvas with a maddened hand, then tears a clutch of sunflowers out of the earth. Vased but still potent, these selected shoots become rich loci of thickly layered yellow-to-ochre pigment in painting after painting.

This extraordinary sequence in Altman's *Vincent and Theo* ('90) at once terrifies and intoxicates. Our vision is assaulted almost to delirium by the natural world's hot flux and largesse. Overcome and outcast by the sheer plethora of external phenomena, the artist-hero according to Altman must find some access to the heart of the matter. Racking focus, riding a slow zoom, framing a crowded, multiplaned field of vision, Altman's hungry eye can never get enough to contain the whole mystery. That unsatisfied appetite can feel like an abyss inside, dissociation or death.

The christs, madonnas, holy ghosts, magdalenes, and judases of Altman's mythology are all looking to take communion in some kind of company of saints. Though they fall far short of finding definitive food, family, and shelter—even in dreams and art—the director's high-flyers, private eyes, soul-snatchers, lovers and other strangers pattern a cinematic nervous system unparalleled in its complex vitality. Like some of his real and imagined communities (Lion's Gate, Presbyterian Church, *Popeye*'s Sweethaven, Philip Marlowe's apartment building, La-La Land), this collection of eccentric synapses hangs on the edge of things, connected only by suspension bridges.

Altman's images work like poetic metaphors, each one webbing outward within and beyond its home-film, an ever-widening gyre that takes in his whole oeuvre. Tease out for a moment that thread of gold from *Vincent and Theo*: thirteen ways of looking at a field of sunflowers. In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* ('71), islands of golden light signal a whole range of sanctuary for the eye, from McCabe's striking the match that starts a movie/town, to the proliferating lamps and fires that glow against wilderness gloom, to a cold-comfort church in flames that unites a community, freezing out the maverick soul who dreamed up Presbyterian Church in the first place.

Mrs. Miller's plates of scrambled eggs shimmer like soul food, but she's no fertile Van Gogh, whose blackened teeth ally him in taste to gold-crowned McCabe (Warren Beatty), done in by a restless scrim of sunlit snow-motes. Constance Miller (Julie Christie) is a conspicuous, tidily corrupt consumer who knows the value of food and keeps it locked up in her heart. Paul Gauguin's her crueler kin, a judas who deliberately designs his food into aesthetic forms that are meant to kiss off and madden his better half. When Vincent Van Gogh (Tim Roth) lets wine flow out of his slack mouth, he is assenting to his degenerating mental health, but also flaunting the holy appetite that drives the way he takes in and passionately transubstantiates the world.

McCabe's an expendable auteur of lucrative mise-en-scène; Presbyterian Church's payoff will accrue to real moneymen after he's gone, just as, in modern day auction, Van Gogh's sunflowers pan out in the millions. Mrs. Miller, McCabe's art director and accountant, focuses in on the brown bowl of an opium pipe until its curve becomes the molten edge of a sun. The poetry that McCabe had in him speaks out largely in warm shelters built of rich yellow lumber and his symbiotic attachment to his "Beautiful Dreamer," the whore with a heart of gold (literally), who sucks solar heat and sustenance into her very pupil as snow swallows him up. McCabe's crouched shape prefigures

Theo Van Gogh's (Paul Rhys) naked form in a dark cell, his body bent, his face and arm upraised to moonlight, Constance made constant to the point of lunacy.

Van Gogh's struggle to find a way to look at his field of sunflowers falls on the same spectrum that carries BBC Opal's (Geraldine Chaplin in *Nashville*, '75) skirmish with a screenful of yellow school buses she reduces to journalistic banalities. Further down the line ('77), *Three Women*'s Millie Lammoreaux (Shelley Duvall) uses a little imagination to color-coordinate her apartment, clothes, and car in shades of yellow, as though symbolic sun might fill and warm the void of her ghostly existence—though it's Sissy Spacek's Pinky Rose who will grow large with Millie's personality: an embryonic stage in the evolution of a trinity of women into self-sufficient matriarchy.

"We are all alone . . . on parallel lines," raves Mrs. Hellstrom (Viveca Lindfors) during *A Wedding* ('78), the ritual that is supposed to "merge the interests of community and nature." Presiding spirit over yet another flawed union, matriarch of family and the movies alike, Lillian Gish lies dead upstairs throughout the festivities. When one of Altman's Miltonian storms drives the members of his teeming anti-family down into the basement, a born-again Baptist leads them in a comforting chorus or two of "Heavenly Sunlight." Altman's camera eventually rises to the sky, as blue and noncommittal as *Nashville*'s ending.

Gish is on the same wavelength with *Nashville*'s country-music queen Barbara Jean (Ronee Blakley)—they share sweet smiles, dreams of what "My Old Idaho Home" once was, and death. Neither can be sustaining angels; as with Louise (Sally Kellerman), explicitly angelic mentor to *Brewster McCloud* ('70), scars are where their wings were. The antithesis to these sweetfaced patron saints is *Three Women*'s Dirty Gerty, the witchy head that, spitting in the face of humankind, screeches a mocking death-rattle laugh. The only angel in *A Wedding* is a black, blank-eyed *penates* at the door of Gish's home—its frozen posture and lack of affect an echo of Barbara Jean-wannabe Sueleen Gay (Gwen Welles) and her paralyzed stance against a fake Parthenon pillar in the aftermath of a kind of ritual murder.

Let the sun go for awhile, and track blackbirds. Brewster's fairy godmother carries a raven as familiar; presumably its shit adorns the dead faces of those who would ground her protégé—and it must share in Louise's terrible birdcry of bereavement signaling Brewster's fall, his flesh now too much with him for flying. Her white witchery is no match for Dirty Gerty's mir-

ing of all human endeavor. In *The Player* ('92), moviemaker Griffin Mill (Tim Robbins) never aspires to flying; his white-robed *gudmundsdottir* (Greta Scacchi) makes him at home in her blue cave of unfinished, self-reflexive paintings; and both of these beautiful dream-stealers rest comfortably in mud baths. Leaning back arrogantly on an ebon couch, black-clad arms spread wide, Mill judases his jilted girlfriend and acutest critic (Cynthia Stevenson): "You'll land on your feet. You always do."

Louise's birdcry of awful loss and incipient madness is echoed by Brewster (Bud Cort), who doesn't land on his feet, and the crows in Van Gogh's wheatfield, the violent black lines that slash his Provence sky. Self-wounded, Vincent disappears into the landscape he would have painted, loosing a coven of crows into the air, as though his soul had flown up in agony.

In *Short Cuts* ('93), where Dirty Gerty mostly reigns, Dr. Wyman (Matthew Modine), just one among many cuckolds, turns his white-painted clown-face to the camera, opens his mouth wider than a mouth should go, and shrieks an *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* version of Louise's heartbroken caw. He might be one of his wife's canvases, hyperrealistic variations on Munch's "The Scream." When faultlines finally fracture under and within pool cleaner Chris Penn and he beats down the hateful flesh that so unmans him, a flock of birds explodes out of the underbrush, madness on the wing. At the beginning of *M\*A\*S\*H* ('70), wartime whirlybirds transported bloodied souls for healing; by *Short Cuts*, the blackbirds (camouflaged in patriotic red, white, and blue) spray America's City of Angels with a pesticide in the "war against the medfly." Maybe medflies are what we become after we've fallen so far from grace.

What refuge is there from blackbirds? Altman wheelers-and-dealers such as *M\*A\*S\*H*'s Hawkeye and Trapper John (Donald Sutherland, Elliott Gould) and *California Split*'s Bill and Charlie (George Segal, Gould) work desperately to be insiders, their cooler-than-thou shticks thin insurance against getting frozen out, disappearing, breaking down. Altman's eye so powerfully authenticates the illusion of community—among hotshot medics or gamblers on a winning streak—that when the house of cards collapses we're left with nowhere to go.

In the profoundly elegiac *California Split* ('74), Bill and Charlie trip off to Reno's Land of Oz to rake in what they're missing—money and meaning. After Altman's rich movies take us in by offering food and shelter, they often conclude by striking the set and drifting off toward nothing. In the aftermath of his