

## Looking At Robert Altman's Cinema Through An Anti-Hollywood Perspective

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### Abstract

*This article aims to analyze Robert Altman's narrative and cinematic discourses as developed through his personal style from an anti-Hollywood perspective, by looking at two of his films: McCabe and Mrs. Miller (1971) and Nashville (1975). The article will concentrate on filmic characteristics seen in many of Altman's films but more prominent in these particular films. Among these characteristics, one can see subversion of generic tropes; particularly that of the western – a genre which is associated with America itself. Through the ironic subversion of narrative codes, Altman has created an anti-western text. While doing this, Altman often employs self-reflexive elements and open endings in order to make the audience reflect on the values of their culture, particularly popular culture. The films, made in the 1970s, come after a period of hope for society and Hollywood; while the revolutionary fervor of the 1960s had fizzled, the devastating effects of the Vietnam War were being felt throughout society. Moreover, Hollywood's renaissance was slowly giving way to blockbusters. In the films examined, Altman engages in a criticism of American culture by looking at masculinity, politics and show business. This criticism is laden with irony, employing an anti-Hollywood perspective, as distinguished by his auteurism.*

**Keywords:** Robert Altman, anti-Hollywood, self-reflexivity, genre, the western

## Anti-Hollywood Perspektifinden Robert Altman Sinemasına Bakmak

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### Öz

*Bu makale, Robert Altman'ın McCabe and Mrs. Miller (1971) ve Nashville (1975) isimli filmlerinden yola çıkarak; yönetmenin anlatısal ve sinemasal söylem bağlamında geliştirmiş olduğu kendine has üslubu anti-Hollywood perspektifinden incelemeyi amaçlamıştır. Çalışma, Altman'ın birçok filminde görülen ve bu iki filminde çok daha belirgin olan niteliklere odaklanmıştır. Bunlardan en önemlisi, Altman'ın film metinlerinde -adeta Amerika'nın kendisiyle özdeşleşen- western türünün anlatısal kodlarını ironik bir biçimde alt-üst etmiş (bir bakıma anti-western metnine dönüştürmüş) olmasıdır. Altman'ın bunu yaparken sıklıkla öz-düşünümsel (self-reflexive) öğelere başvurmuş ve açık sonlarla seyircinin düşünüş ve sorgusunu popüler kültür üzerine yöneltmiş olduğu görülür. Her iki filmin de üretildiği 70'li yıllar, hem Amerikan toplumu hem de Hollywood için bir umut döneminin sona erdiği yıllardır. 60'ların devrimci ruhundan uzaklaşmış, Vietnam Savaşı'nın yarattığı yıkımın etkileri toplumsal ve ekonomik alanda çok daha fazla hissedilmeye başlanmıştır. Bununla birlikte 60'ların umudu haline gelmiş olan Yeni Hollywood akımı yerini yeniden geleneksel anlatı kodlarıyla örülmüş büyük bütçeli filmlere bırakmış, stüdyolar film üretim alanındaki hâkimiyeti yeniden ele geçirmiştir. Altman, tam da böyle bir dönemde ürettiği filmlerle bu umudu sürdürmeye çalışmış, kendine has üslubunu korumuştur. Çalışmanın incelediği filmlerde erkeklik, politika ve şov dünyası üzerinden Amerikan kültürüne dair keskin ve ironik bir eleştirinin, anti-Hollywood perspektifinde özgün bir sinemasal söylemle ortaya konulduğu görülmüştür.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Robert Altman, anti-Hollywood, öz-düşünümsellik, tür, western*

## Introduction

Anyone who watches an Altman film will realize from the first opening sequences that something is not 'quite right', in terms of Classical Hollywood style. Where one expects a linear plot and a set of chore characters introduced one by one, in an Altman film, this is rarely the case. Instead, we get fragments; destroyed individuals, large casts and a confusion of time and space. When one expects melodramatic music to heightened emotional response, or beautiful A-list actors enchanting the screens, in an Altman film, this, also, is not seen very often. Instead, A-list actors are de-glamorized, and emotional response lies in the lack of any narrative sign posts forcing one out of us. Instead, one is faced with long shots, moments of long silence, yet also sometimes overlapping dialogues to reflect the spontaneity of everyday conversations. Indeed, this cinematic language, particular to Altman, reflected the general shift in formal practices exemplified in the New Hollywood period. The 1960s can be globally characterized as a time where alternative discourses began to circulate among the population in reaction to political developments. A youth counter culture emerged in response to the ongoing American involvement in Vietnam, primarily opposing militarism and, in general, revolting against authoritarianism. This counter culture emanated in all areas of society, where the civil rights movement strongly shook the foundation of myths forming the American nation. These cracks led to the dismantling of the 'American dream', and many filmmakers took cue from these developments and reflected them in their films. Not only were these adapted to storytelling, but the general opposition to established systems was also integrated into filmmaking practice where the Classical Hollywood's formal practices were purposefully sidetracked to give way to alternative means of expression.<sup>1</sup> Thus, films which validated the status quo slowly gave way to films aware of injustices, with the shift in creative control from producers to

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<sup>1</sup> *There are several reasons as to why Classical Hollywood style lost its monopoly in filmic representation at the time. Audience numbers started to drop due to the advent of television; cinema had new competition. While Hollywood executives tried to retain profitability, they did not have the formula to address demographics and dwindling audience numbers and often produced box office failures. As a result, risk-taking became the only solution. It is within this framework that creative control was handed over to a younger generation of directors and producers, who found new ways of connecting with audiences, reflecting a daily reality, characters and events never seen on the big screen before.*

directors. This period in Hollywood cinema, generally labelled as New Hollywood or Hollywood Renaissance, was characterized by auteur directors who scrutinized both the Hollywood industry and American society at large, thus fundamentally changing the role of cinema as entertainment to cinema as a tool for education of the audiences. According to Peter Biskind, the films of the era were "character-rather than plot-driven, defied traditional narrative conventions, challenged the tyranny of technical correctness, broke taboos of language and behavior, dared to end unhappily. These films were without heroes, without romance, without... anyone to 'root for'" (Biskind 1998, p.17). *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970) critically engaged with the Vietnam War; *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (Sydney Pollack, 1972) denounced the ways in which ruthless capitalism unethically pits individuals competitively against each other through the metaphor of a dance competition and *M\*A\*S\*H* (Robert Altman, 1970) criticized the concept of war through an ironic and absurd narrative that while centered on the Korean War, was actually pointing the finger to the Vietnam War.

It is true to say then that Robert Altman experiments with his films at the potential expense of box office failure. It is also true that this experimentation has paid off; from his earliest films such as *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970) to ones he made in his later age, such as *Gosford Park* (2002), he has received critical acclaim and has been applauded for his innovative storytelling, despite the bleak vision he offers, and managing to relate even a period-drama to contemporary times. He criticizes the very system he works in, with the hopes that structural changes can happen from within. Unlike John Cassavetes, who refused all ties with the studios, wanting to cut cinema completely from its "evil twin, commerce" (Biskind, 1998, p.17), Altman had a more complex relationship with the system, being part of it yet wanting to dismantle it from within at the same time; taking advantage of its perks, while pointing the finger to the problems it was laden with. Yet, while the films of the New Hollywood cinema led to a period of objection and rejection of established norms, eventually it weakened and went into recession by the mid-1970s<sup>2</sup>, where few of the acclaimed directors of the time were able to maintain the uneasy balance be-

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<sup>2</sup> The release of two particular films signaled the return to spectacle on the screen: *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) and *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977). With these films, the era of the blockbuster arrived, entertainment becoming once again the function of cinema, relegating more 'artistic' productions to the margins.

tween art and commerce. The system was mending itself, pacifying social reactions, leading way to a general atmosphere of pessimism both in society and in cinema. According to Ertan Yılmaz, (Yılmaz, 2009, p.77) films addressing political issues such as *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1975), three *Days of the Condor* (Sydney Pollack, 1975), *China Syndrome* (James Bridges, 1979) and *Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1974), demonstrated the futility of heroic actions, thus reflecting the pessimism prevalent in the psychology of the American people (p.98-99).

Nonetheless, it is important to look at Altman's work critically, because, in a sense, that is why he made them. Among the New Hollywood directors, it would not be wrong to say that he was the one who engaged in social criticism through the most varied representation strategies. The films often question what it means to be an American living in its ideological system; and because of the non-linear narrative, there are many interpretations to his open ended story-lines. Due to the self-reflexive elements in his films, Altman distances the audience from the film, hence making it a more detached viewing, forcing us to think about the issues and the events unfolding in front of our eyes.

When it comes to character configuration, once again, Altman is full of surprises. There never seems to be one definite protagonist with whom the audience can identify with. Instead, Altman makes use of ensemble casts, wherein there are several characters, not one necessarily playing a more important role than the other, but instead, simply going about their own business for us to watch and see. We never get to know a character well enough to be able to identify with; instead we get a surface glance at them, and as soon as things get intimate, we move on to the next set of characters. Furthermore, there is a sense of destruction when it comes to individual characters; they never seem to be able to respond to events successfully or uphold any romantic relationship and, hence, end up miserable.

## Method

This article will conduct narrative and discourse analysis of two films: *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Nashville*. In his book *Story and Discourse*, Seymour Chatman lays out the foundation of this method of analysis, which entails looking at narrative structure, the elements of storytelling, and their combination and

articulation (Chatman, 1980). In addition to this framework, which comes from a literary paradigm, the textual analysis of the films will be an important methodology in order to understand the ways in which the films incorporate these discourses, through medium-specific techniques.

When conducting this analysis, the article will employ the narrative codes of the films' genres. Genre is a method of classification for films based on certain shared similarities and the emotional responses they elicit in their audiences. A film belonging to a specific genre has a fixed plot, well-defined characters, and a predictable ending. Indeed, attempts to define genre begin with ideas of familiarity. This allows for predefined patterns to work in a unified manner within a given framework. This formula creates an implicit contract between the audiences and the films, who are encouraged to have certain expectations based on familiarity with conventions with regards to images, sounds and narrative elements. Audiences recognize genres through assumptions that they accumulate the more they watch films belonging to those generic categories.

Altman employs the narrative structure of the western, yet he subverts and plays with its codes in order to reveal a cinematic discourse which could be said to be anti-western. The western genre is one of the genres whose outline has been established through dozens of films since the 1930s. According to the American Film Institute, the definition of the Western is "a genre of films set in the American West that embodies the spirit, the struggle and the demise of the new frontier" (American Film Institute, 2020). Western films are generally set in the later half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, and include a cowboy or a gunman-type in the lead role. Specific settings such as ranches, saloons, railways and small towns on vast landscape backgrounds set the Western's imagery. The narration is dominated with heroic, masculine, patriotic, climactic storylines. Generic boundaries in western films are not only established with narrative or discursive elements, but also with ideological and social codes.

In this respect, the anti-western does not only contain a generic opposition, but also opposes all ideological and social values sanctified by the western genre, subjecting them to a critical perspective. There are no stereotypical representations presented as merely good or bad in anti-western films and the social class or identities to which the characters belong are not shaped by ideological impositions. The narrative does not repeat certain patterns. The plot, characters and actions are more than just a part of standardized storylines; on

the contrary, they are uniquely shaped on breaking this routine, with the aim of experiencing, showing and thinking about the alternative. This is exactly what is seen in Altman's movies. The anti-western elements in his cinema are an explicit “reverse reading” guide presented to question the way of thinking imposed on the American society and the existing traditional values that were frequently addressed in the films produced at that time.

The concept of self-reflexivity will be important in demonstrating how Altman manages to do this. Self-reflexivity, which Robert T. Self describes as “the process by which text, both literary and cinematic, foreground their own production, their authorship, their inter-textual influences, their reception or their enunciation” is pervasive in both films (Self, 2002, p.179). Indeed, self-reflexivity is a narrative element that is often employed in contemporary films as well, as it is a device which informs the audience that they are watching a film. By using self-reflexive elements in both films, Altman activates the critical engagement of the audience. Altman directs his criticism to social values, as dictated by the popular culture of the time, and often glorified in the films of the time. In this manner, both films can be characterized as anti-Hollywood. By conducting the narrative and discourse analysis of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Nashville*, the article will focus on how masculinity, politics and show business have been represented through the quizzical perspective derived by self-reflexivity.

### **Resisting the Western from within: Mc.Cabe and Mrs. Miller**

This film has come to be known as an anti-western because it is an “assault on genre” (Gilbey, 2003, p.120) consciously subverting the conventions of the traditional western. It seems fitting for Altman to have chosen this particular genre in order to engage in a critique of America and masculinity. The western, described by André Bazin as the “American film par excellence” (Bazin, 2005, p.140) has since its advent dealt with the validation of masculinity and man’s opposition to nature through his establishment of civilization. The figure of the cowboy has become emblematic of ideas of masculinity. Yet those elements which are key for a traditional western to be considered one, are not detectable in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*:

Altman has pointed out that he wanted to take a look at the western "from a different angle" (Sterritt, 2000, p.198) and de-mystify this typically American, legendary genre. Generally speaking, genre has been a key site of exploration throughout Altman's career, where by "transcending its constructs...[he] communicate[s] his own personal homilies on the nature of cinema and society" (Teo, 2015, p.254). In treating the western, Altman seeks to expose the foundation of its myth, using the genre allegorically to reflect modern or contemporary politics and society.

From the opening sequence, we see a desolate landscape, and the first place we are introduced to is a gambling den. For the rest of the film, the events will go back and forth between such cool exteriors, and warm interiors. Our hero, McCabe, is a "shallow, vain, barely competent gambler" (Self, 2002, p.91). A typical Altman protagonist, according to Robin Wood, embodies "a combination of arrogance and vulnerability" that springs from 'arrested adolescence,' an unheroic figure who embarks on a quest and is done in by his own 'assumption of control,' which proves to be falsely based" (Robin, 1986, p.31-32). For Stephen Teo, McCabe "marked a synchronic representation of the counterculture" (Teo, 2015, p.260). McCabe eventually becomes the operator of the town's whorehouse; two words that would not even come close to mention in a traditional western.

There is no family unit, no glorification of land and no union of the hero and his woman, all staples of the western. Instead, the love interest of our anti-hero is a prostitute, Mrs. Miller who becomes McCabe's business partner in running the brothel. This is very much a business; when a new girl joins the house, Mrs. Miller compares the job to marriage; except better because you get paid for it. The brothel blossoms and happens to be the only place in the film that is not unhappy. The brothel is like a sanctuary; people are laughing and having a good time. This 'positive' atmosphere is even depicted in the colors of the setting where warm red tones reign. Furthermore, the prostitutes are the family; they bond like sisters and celebrate birthdays, along with cake and candles.

In fact, these women appear to be stronger than the men in the film. Mrs. Miller dictates the relationship she has with McCabe and shows him how to run a business successfully. While McCabe is unable to make a responsible decision, ultimately leading to his death, he neither knows his math, at which point Mrs. Miller takes charge of the books. She does not need McCabe; in

fact, when they do sleep together, this is under the title of business as well, and even though there seems to be moments of closeness, it is all an illusion; half the time McCabe is drunk and Mrs. Miller high on opium. Warmth and security are delusions; not real and only momentary as the next morning, there is no signs of a shared moment of intimacy. Furthermore, it is pathetic to see McCabe drunkenly mumbling under his breath and complaining about Mrs. Miller's authority, when he can barely take off his boots. He ends up sitting there drunkenly burping in the dark; not a very proud moment for McCabe...

Under these circumstances, a relationship between a man and a woman seems impossible; there are too many issues playing against a prosperous 'happily-ever-after' ending. Instead, we are given the impression that sex and money are the basis of civilization, and not love – at least not one dictated by patriarchy. This can be seen as a metaphor on Altman's behalf in portraying America itself and the values it has begun to uphold. In this system, it is difficult to love and be loved and instead, there is only self-interest that people hold dear. There is no sense of community outside of the brothel, other than when the church is burning and everyone in the town gets together to water it down. This particular scene is intercut with the one of McCabe dying. While the community goes to save a building that they disregarded throughout the film, McCabe is dying in an un-climactic way; he is buried under the heavily falling snow, his body and face completely covered, to be forgotten, and maybe discovered once the snow melts. Another elements of the western genre, the show-down with the 'villain', is also dealt with in lackluster fashion; in the traditional western sense, this should be a climactic and exciting scene where the audiences sit at the edge of their seats and impatiently watch the showdown. Moreover, the divide between good and evil is clearly defined, symbolically through the representation of the characters; but this too Altman has done away with. Instead, he drags out the conflict, inter-cut with desolate shots of the whitened landscape, with gaps and silences, that the audience is forced to watch patiently as the showdown unfolds. There is no music to heightened our emotional response to McCabe's death; instead we watch his tumbling and final moment of death.

This film is important in Altman's legacy because he does something that has never been done before; he plays with the expectations of the audience

and completely destabilizes the meaning of the western; by reversing its conventions, he makes visible everything about the western that is Hollywood. Moreover, in the context of the counter culture that had emerged in reaction to the Vietnam War, the film "debunks and revises the optimistic ideology of manifest destiny so central to the western traditionally" (Self, 2002, p.92) thus effectively engaging the staples of the genre with the contemporary cultural climate. With the beautiful musical commentary of Leonard Cohen, the film takes on a nostalgic tone of sadness depicting the "romance of isolation" (Gilbey, 2003, p.114) and a life that could have been. Pauline Kael captures this spirit by stating that in the film "Everything is in motion, and yet there is a stillness about the film, as if every element in it were conspiring to tell the same incredibly sad story: that the characters are lost in their separate dreams" (Pauline, 1994, p.378).

### **Exposing America through a microcosm: Nashville**

If with *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, Altman demonstrated the devastating loneliness within oneself, with *Nashville*, it is a vast picture that is depicted with the audience acting as a voyeur; peeking into the lives of the characters, even if it is only momentarily. If with *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, Altman demonstrated the basis of our society being sex and money, then with *Nashville*, he is showing his viewers the loss of innocence of a country. As in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, no man/woman relationship seems to be possible in such a world of existence and the only things you need to survive in the 'show business' world of country music, are good looks and good connections; sometimes, even that doesn't seem to suffice. *Nashville* uses an ensemble cast of 24 characters whom we follow and try to understand, despite the clear alienation of the audience leading to a distance between audience and characters, due to the film's intense self-reflexivity.

When watching the film there are several common Altman themes that pop up; from the overlapping sound, to the unedited long shots, all these trends give the film a documentary-like feel also due to the unobtrusive nature of the camera work. There is no coherent plot; not one thing happens. Instead, several events take place at the same time to finally culminate in the shooting of Barbara Jean, the loved yet mentally unstable country singer. Furthermore, it is impossible to give a film synopsis; at the best we can say it is a

film about 24 characters who wander and go about their own business in America's country-music capital before destiny brings them together at the moment of an inexplicable assassination. During the production, Altman allowed for his actors to improvise, in order to further reinforce the style of ironic Brechtian distance. (Klein, 1975, p.7). This method was further strengthened by the fact that Altman did not warn his actors when he would start and end a take, thus catching them unaware. Such methods allow for a distance to be well-established as identification with any given character does not take place in the classical sense; all characters are flawed, and the structure of the film, which renders following narrative continuity difficult, further prevents audience engagement with these flawed characters one-on-one.

The assassination in the film comes as a surprise to audiences because it is so unexpected and seems unmotivated; however, if one pays close attention, throughout the film there are signifiers letting the audience know that something is coming. With the constant referral to death, guns and killing, it is inevitable that something of the sort is on the way. However, the reason for Kenny's fatal action is unknown and is left open ended for the audiences to figure out. What is more significant however is the fact that once shot, Barbara Jean is taken away, and the concert continues, as the public continues to sing. This particular moment, for Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, reflects what *Nashville* is essentially about; what Hollywood never shows: "the sleazy underside of the American Dream of success that is concealed by the stage of cultural spectacle" (Ryan and Kellner. 1988, p.271). Albuquerque finally gets her 'big break' as she is handed over the microphone and begins to sing 'it don't worry me'. This song plays a symbolic role in the film's metaphor for America. First of all, it is repeated several times in the film, where at the end it is actually sung out to an audience. What this song represents is the mind set of the American population according to Altman. Because politicians seem to take care of things, the people do not question and continue living their lives as if all were in order. There is a blind faith in government which limits our vision of whatever lingers beyond and under closed doors. With a shot of the American flag looming over the last moments of the film, this state of mind is further emphasized. The fact that the only visible politician in the film, Triplette, is a two-timing manipulator says something about the nature of politics. Furthermore, with the shooting of Barbara Jean, instead of a poli-

tician, which would have been a more understandable ending, Altman emphasizes the shift of interest within the people's mind from matters of government and justice to more local, celebrity culture. There is a red-blue-white color theme throughout the film and credits which depict a visible patriotism that is empty beyond the surface because it is not questioned.

This metaphoric representation of the mind set of the American population ties in with the self-reflexive elements in the film, making the audience aware that they are watching a film, and hence should think critically about what is depicted. In Roger B. Rollin's words: "*Nashville* is not about the city in Tennessee nor is it about the South in general. Nor is it really about Country-and-Western music or the Country-and-Western music industry. It is, in one significant respect, a popular film about popular film and about popular culture in general, though, paradoxically, it implies that popular film is less popular, less central to popular culture, than such media as television, radio, and records." (Rollin, 1977, p.41).

The film opens in fact with an advertisement for the soundtrack of the film, with the name of the fake artist scrolling down one side of the screen, and the name of the actors on the other. This ad is the perfect opener to the film and sets the tone for the fakeness and superficiality of the show business industry. Throughout the film there are constant reminders of the fact that this is a film, and not reality; there is an abundance of cameras, TV reporters, photography and microphones. Furthermore, the use of real actors like Elliot Gould and Julie Christie underlines this point and points the finger to Hollywood illusionism. When Julie Christie meets Connie White, a popular country music artist as well as Barbara Jean's 'friend', she is greeted with sympathy by the men, but as soon as she turns her back, Connie White makes a remark about her hair and her inability to brush it, showing the dual nature of the people in the industry. This is also reinforced with Elliot Gould's appearance at a barbecue party, wherein people apologize for greeting him like "someone off the street" because they failed to realize who he actually was. These reactions reinforce the fact that the people have become obsessed with celebrity to the point of masking their true feelings and changing their attitudes. In fact, Altman states, "I don't like the idea of superstars – they're an excuse for the masses not to think about their own problems" (Self, 2002, p.204), once again proving the shifting passions within the country from politics to the "culture of glamour" (Gilbey, 2003, p.117).

It is important to look at relationships between men and women, as well as the representation of women themselves in this film. Like in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, romance no longer seems the source of social stability. The relationships in this America do not seem to work; even the most stable of families and people happen to eventually 'lose it'. Linnea, the mother of two deaf children, seems to have it all together. Her husband Delbert, however, does not even know sign language, which causes a disconnect within the family as he is unable to communicate with his own children; in fact, he appears to be indifferent and not bothered by this disconnect whatsoever. Linnea does the job of both parents; she takes the time to listen to her children, teaches them how to sing in sign language, and is patient with her husband. However, even the most put together person cracks under the pressure of courting. Tom, who is a famous musician and a man who "gets through women like underwear" (Gilbey, 2003, 118), keeps calling her, and eventually she cracks and goes to him. On his side, Delbert is also hitting on celebrity wannabe Sueleen Gay. On the other hand, Tom is also having an affair with the wife of his band mate Bill. These two respective couples' relationships are filled with lies and infidelity. Tom is idolized and loved by many of the women in the film, but is incapable of loving anyone other than himself; every time he is in bed with a different woman, one of his songs is playing on the tape recorder, mirroring his giant ego, but, also, his innate loneliness. When it comes to Barbara Jean and her husband Barnett, the case is a bit different considering Barbara Jean is mentally unstable; Barnett does stick by her side and does not betray her, but Barbara Jean is a sad case to look at. She is a singer who can't even perform anymore, as she is seen rambling on about her childhood in front of a booing crowd. She is the very product of the system that has been exploiting her since a young age. Though she knew she always wanted to be a singer, she did achieve her dream; for the price of her mental health. There is a sense that is what happens to good people in the industry, whose hearts are too good to handle the pressure, lies and indecent proposals. Barbara Jean is always dressed in white, giving her a virginal, holy look. She is a child-woman, who has regressed due to her illness. She is directly in contrast with Sueleen Gay, who wants fame and fortune. She is a tone deaf singer, who simply does not understand her lack of talent and is disillusioned by dreams of fame. Her idol is in fact Barbara Jean, whom she wants to be like one day. However, as we mock Sueleen's inability to sing, we are instantly silenced when she is

forced into a striptease in return of a performance promise alongside Barbara Jean. She strips down, and despite the degrading situation, she is still excited at the prospect of singing alongside her idol, without a single sense of remorse in her voice. Her dreams and disillusionment are so strong that not even Wade's warnings seem to faze her.

The family unit itself is broken down, when L.A. Joan comes to visit her dying aunt and is unable to see her before she passes away due to her 'distractions'. L.A. Joan is constantly on the hunt, going from one guy to the next, always having an eye on the watch. She postpones seeing her aunt, even though that is the main reason she flew from California to Nashville in the first place, but instead gets distracted by all the men she crosses on her path. Even though Mr. Green, her uncle, tries to convince her to come see her aunt, even for a little bit, she refuses, saying she will go later. L.A. Joan is an interesting character to look at because she does what typically men do in reality; she hits on men to get into their pants. This comes very naturally to her and she has no shame. Furthermore, Opal, the reporter from BBC is the same way; even though, like L.A. she has a blinding fascination with celebrity, she too seems to sleep around with an ease, without any remorse or long term expectations. America is exciting to her; an adventure that she won't live again, so she takes the experience to the fullest and often is the comic relief in the film with her 'ignorant' comments and questions. Indeed, her ignorance can only lead to deception, as Altman has depicted throughout the film, the deep schism between the reality and ideals, the delusion of the public with regards to the value system they uphold, its utter fakeness exposed in the 3 hours of the film.

## Conclusion

Through the analysis of two Robert Altman films, this article has sought to examine the critical way in which the director criticized the priorities and values of American society in the 1970s. Through an overview of the social and political changes occurring in the United States at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, the article has contextualized Altman's concerns. Altman's two films (*McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Nashville*) attracted the attention of the American film industry of the 1970s because of their cinematic dis-

course and narrative structures. It has been observed that the narrative structures established by Altman in both films were shaped according to a perspective far beyond the boundaries seen in the Hollywood movies of the period. Both films are described as anti-Hollywood in this respect. Therefore, the most important result that emerges when Altman's style is analyzed is that the narrative tools in his films are shaped over elements such as anti-generic setup, self-reflexivity and open-ended storyline. It can be said that Altman, who turned his back on classical narrative, invited the audience of contemporary narratives to engage critically with film texts, through his unique style. While doing this, Altman also preferred to overturn generic codes of the western, thus activating the state of reflection in the audience. For the audience, who is confronted with a universe outside of formal and narrative standards, this questioning took place on two levels: "What do these movies say? and "How do these movies say it?" The answers to the questions are the fundamental features that characterize the questioning approach. Through the subversion of essentially American symbols, Altman's cinema has been criticized for its bleak vision and yet the films' self-conscious stance has positioned his films to the status of art reflecting on its times, exposing and questioning the very values that have become synonymous with American society. In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Nashville*, the target of this critical view has been the American culture itself, exemplified through masculinity, politics and show business; thus, it was concluded that an authentic style from an ideologically and socially anti-generic and anti-Hollywood perspective was effectively established in both films. It is also important to note that *Nashville* was the last of its kind; beginning of 1975 started the big budget studio films such as *Jaws* that shifted audience expectations and demands on the big screen. Indeed, with *Jaws*, Hollywood reverted to its primary purpose of entertainment, relegating more reflective works to the margins of the industry. Moreover, even 'political' films regressed into pessimism, losing their critical edge. Nonetheless, Altman maintained his engagement with social critique throughout his career, which spanned until 2006, also the year of his death.

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