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**DAVID  
THORBURN:**

Good afternoon, people. We begin this afternoon our-- if I'm right about this, I think I am, as the syllabus shows-- that this is the last American film we'll be looking at in the term. So we're sort of finishing of the Central American phase of our course with tonight's film, Robert Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*.

And I want to use this afternoon's lecture to contextualize that moment of the early '70s-- the late '60s and early '70s-- in American film history. And to try to draw out some of the implications of the astonishing transformation that overtook American film in this period.

We've been talking about this topic in different ways all semester. So by now I think the narrative that I've been implicitly following in the course should already be overt for all of you. The film we're going to see tonight, Robert Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, can be understood as are particularly clear example of the kind of transformation and even subversion that becomes a dominant note of American movie making in the 1970s.

And part of the lecture today will be devoted to speculating about why that transformation, why those forms of subversion, occurred. And of course, if you've been paying attention in the course, you know the answer already and it's the answer that's already embedded in the lecture outline. A new form of what I've been calling consensus narrative emerges really decisively by the middle and end of the 1960s and into the 1970s.

It's a period that takes time but, essentially, television supplants the movies as the central story system of the society. Not that movies become trivial or unimportant, but they begin to occupy a new niche in the media ecology of the country. And I'll return to this matter briefly in a few moments.

But let me begin by clarifying something about the importance of the presence in our syllabus of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and more generally, the prominence we've given in our course to the genre of the Western film. So I ask you to remember the sorts of things we were saying about genre forms generally. About the aptness-- even one one might think of as the economic

necessity genre forms for a system that is based on the principle of mass production.

And I also want to suggest to you that the particular forms of genre story, the particular kind of story that is told in a particular society and certainly the ones that are told in the generic forms that are chosen by American society, are going to very powerfully reflect aspects of the culture. And we made a special emphasis on the importance in our previous classes of two particular genres that emerge with great decisiveness in the sound era.

Both identified by some scholars as America's most distinctive contribution to world cinema. One form was the screwball comedy and the elaborations on comedy that developed through the '30s and 1940s. And the second form, the second distinctive American contribution to film-- has some scholars have said-- is the Western. And we've talked a bit about the nature of the Western and how the Western as a form is rooted in the assumptions and preoccupations of American culture.

How it grows out of an historical actuality-- the period roughly from 1860 to 1890-- when the Civil War occurred, when the range wars occurred, when the when the great gold discoveries were made at the California Gold Rush, the laying of the transcontinental railroad. All of these historical realities that become mythic elements in the founding story that becomes the epic account of American identity. The epic account of America's founding.

And I've suggested that the creation of that mythology, expressed so powerfully and complexly often-- and disturbingly too because there's a racism, as we've said and imperialism implicit in certain aspects of the Western mythology-- that fundamental energy of the genre, as we've suggested, is not only deeply rooted in American culture, and grows out of the particular individualistic preoccupations of American culture as we suggested last time.

But also, then becomes a particularly dramatic instance of what we might say the movies as a whole have been in American society. Or were in American society, until the advent of television. And that is, each genre, and then the Western genre especially, can be understood as kind of a small inversion of the larger processes that operates in this consensus system.

And if you recall the kinds of things we were suggesting last week about the evolution of the Western, what we were confronting in a certain sense was the way in which this astonishingly protean shift-changing mythology can be altered depending on the preoccupations of the society that wants to mobilize the mythology.

Another way of putting this is to say, the mythology, like the larger culture, is never fixed. It's always in process, right. So that when one Western appears, a kind of conversation is going on with all previous Westerns. And maybe with other forms of discourse as well, about the central preoccupations that are part of the Western. I just want to remind you of the sort of historical scheme that I sketched in last time about the Western, so you can recognize the point at which *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* sort of fits our picture.

Remember that I suggested in some degree that when the Western as a form emerges after the '30s, when it's mainly are sort of novelty item, which are singing cowboys in it and that sort of thing-- When the classic Western emerges in 1939 with John Ford's film-- what's the name of the film-- Stagecoach, the first film that Ford filmed in Monument Valley-- when the age of the so-called classical age of the Western begins in the 1940s, I suggested in that lecture that the Western's of that period had a kind of imperial dimension. That those were the Westerns that most decisively and fully celebrated the white settlers idea of the manifest destiny of the American experiment.

Which was translated of course into exterminate the Indians. The Indians are sort of in the way. The Westward expansion of the United States was, in many ways, clearly an imperial and even a racist project. But in the period of the 1940s, the disturbing elements of the mythology were suppressed or ignored, even though they were implicit. Why would that have been.

Well one reason was America itself was at war in the 1940s. And the Western was a particularly appropriate. It was not the only vehicle, but it was one of the vehicles in which imperial ideas of American destiny and American identity would be articulated or dramatized. And I suggested in the period of the 1950s, this Western form begin to complicate itself, that it became less imperial. And that there are many Western films of the 1950s that actually reflect many of the domestic concerns of that era.

The generation gap, the discontent of young people growing up into a society that seem to have no work for them-- this is the early 1950s.

And as the decade goes on and leads into the 1960s, an increasing awareness of racial turmoil in the United States-- so Westerns begin to be partly about juvenile delinquency, or about social problems. Always filtered, of course, through the historical lens of the Western. And I suggested to you that the great John Ford classic Western that we saw last week, *The Searchers*, had already in the late '50s began to incorporate certain kinds of subversive

questions.

So the '50s is a time when the Western begins to show social problems. There's a kind of inward turning, in which the psychological problems of characters become important in a new way. And then in the '60s, this questioning of the genre proceeds and expands even more fully. And as we suggested, there are a series of films of Westerns in the '60s that, even more substantially than *The Searchers*, begin to sort of raise doubts about some of the most fundamental questions of the Western.

And of course, as the decade wears on, there are increasing encouragements or incitements from the larger culture-- from the social history of the larger culture-- to make the Western genre begin to question itself. And what are those things that begin to happen as the '60s wears on. They were embedded in the '50s but they become much more serious.

The first is racial turmoil, right. The Civil Rights Movement becomes more and more militant through the 1960s. And there is real conflict in the society emerging very powerfully. And that racial turmoil becomes more and more militant, more and more polarizing as the decade goes on. But what's the other great terrible fact of the 1960s, that explains why American society was so divided. And so uncertain of itself.

The Vietnam War of course, right. By the end of the decade, America's deeply immersed in Vietnam. The college-aged generation is alienated from its elders. There are demonstrations on campuses in 1967, '68, right. And then in 1968, two really horrific assassinations occurred to help mark the 1960s as a decisively disturbed time in American history.

Who are the two great figures who die and were assassinated in 1968. One is Martin Luther King, the great hero of a peaceful, Ghandi-like Civil Rights Movement is assassinated. And that gives it even stronger impetus to the more militant arguments for civil rights that unlike Doctor King's position, did not so it really embrace nonviolence.

So the combination of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement combining together created a tremendous turmoil in American society. And there are many film historians who would say that the totally subversive genre films, the anti-genre films that emerge in the 1970s-- of which the most decisive example in our course is *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, so it completes our argument. There are many who would say that a sufficient explanation for the subversion of the genre, for the fact that the Westerns of the '70s-- that some of the Westerns

of the '70s and beyond-- in some sense, could be identified as anti Western.

So hostile are they-- so hostile are they to the basic assumptions of their ancestors, so much that they turn the heroic values of their ancestors on their head. And you'll and you'll see a wonderfully decisive example of this in tonight's film. There's some social and film historians who would say, well, the difficulties in the outer society-- the war, the Civil Rights Movement, the polarization of the culture is sufficient to explain why these genres, and especially this centrally American genre the Western, would suddenly sort of turn on itself and attack what it had previously celebrated. The notions of individualistic achievement. Notions of violent masculinity.

One of the best books on the Old West and on the Western film, has the wonderful title *Regeneration through Violence. Regeneration through Violence*. And it does describe what the classic Western seems to believe. It's actually a scary idea. You might think about how often this notion has been translated into sort of foreign policy behavior by the United States. Again, reinforcing the importance of these mythologies.

But the social history of the country is not really sufficient fully, to explain why the movies would become so subversive. And what's the answer. It's implied up here in number three, right. It has to do with the new consensus medium.

So let me try to make these arguments in a slightly more systematic way. And first, by talking more concretely about the ways in which the movies were different in the 1970s. Wherever we look at central elements of the movies, we can see a profound change in atmosphere and tone and feel.

The first, if we think about the sort of characteristic actors or acting styles of the period, and especially the characteristic stars and contrast them to the great stars of the studio era, we can get a feel for how much more subversive, problematic, ironic, anti-heroic, this new period in American film is. But there are many, many people who would actually say that this moment in American film is actually one of the-- and I think I might say this-- is a moment of great artistic achievement.

Whatever we would say about the early '70s and the whole decade of the '70s, we could call it a moment or a period of profound transition. A great artistic achievement. But also, an achievement gotten at a profound cost. A fundamental, irreversible shift in the relation of

American movies to their audience, OK. So that's the basic idea.

But what did this shift look like, what did it feel like. Well, I've suggested that it's grungier, more ironic, deeply anti-heroic. And one way I can capture this is by taking a scene from one of the characteristic, really defining actors of the 1970s, of what we might call the post-consensus era, the post-Hollywood era, Jack Nicholson.

I want to show you what is, in some sense, his signature scene. And people who haven't seen *Five Easy Pieces*, where this fragment comes from, know about this scene. What I want to propose to you as you look at this scene is think about Jack Nicholson's behavior in the scene. And ask yourself, is it possible to imagine one of the classic, much more dignified heroes-- male protagonists== movie stars-- from an earlier era behaving in the same way. Could we imagine John Wayne behaving this way. Or could we imagine Jimmy Stewart behaving this way or Henry Fonda behaving. And of course the answer-- I'm sure as you'll recognize-- is no.

Here's the scene then, from *Five Easy Pieces*. Some people would call it Jack Nicholson's signature moment.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

-I'd like a, uh, plain omelette, no potatoes, tomatoes instead, cup of coffee, and wheat toast.

-No substitutions.

-What do you mean? You don't have any tomatoes?

-Only what's on the menu. You can have a number two-- a plain omelette. It comes with cottage fries and rolls.

-Yeah I know what it comes with. But it's not what I want.

-Well I'll come back when you make up your mind.

-Wait a minute. I have made up my mind. I'd like a plain omelet, no potatoes on the plate, a cup of coffee, and a side order of wheat toast.

-I'm sorry we don't have any side orders of toast. I'll give you an English muffin or a coffee roll.

-What do you mean you don't make side orders of toast? You make sandwiches, don't you?

-Would you like to talk to the manager?

-Hey Mac--

-Shut up. You've got bread and toaster of some kind?

-I don't make the rules.

-OK I'll make it as easy for you as I can. I'd like an omelet, plain, and a chicken salad sandwich on wheat toast. No mayonnaise, no butter, no lettuce. And a cup of coffee.

-A number two, chicken sal san, hold the butter, the lettuce, the mayonnaise. And a cup of coffee. Anything else?

-Yeah, now all you have to do is hold the chicken, bring me the toast, give me a check for the chicken salad sandwich, and you haven't broken any rules.

-You want me to hold the chicken, huh?

-I want you to hold it between your knees.

-You see that sign, sir? Yes you'll all have to leave. I'm not taking any more of your smartness and sarcasm?

-Do you see this sign?

-[INAUDIBLE]

[END PLAYBACK]

**DAVID**

Now, you've seen Nicholson in far more frenetic moments in, let's say the Batman movie, right.

**THORBURN:**

But the essence of the Nicholson character, he's actually calmer and nicer there than he normally is. His persona has not been fully established at this early stage in his career. But you can feel the energy there. And the hostility to-- I think we're supposed to be on Nicholson's side in that film-- but when he knocks that stuff off the table. He's doing something that we would never imagine a classic Hollywood hero to have done.

And I don't want to put too great of an emphasis on a single scene, but if you think about Nicholson's incarnations after that movie, you'll understand how decisively and fully a new kind

of actor has emerged in the 1970s. And you might talk about some of the other actors-- you can do the other sheet there, Greg-- that emerge in this period. Warren Beatty. Elliot Gould. Dustin Hoffman. Robert De Niro.

Fewer female stars emerge in this period. But they're important. some of them did begin their careers around this time. And even the actresses standing in the same sort of ironizing and anti-heroic relation to their ancestors as the male actors. We might think about Julie Christie, who is the co-star of tonight's film in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*. Or Jane Fonda. Or the actress Faye Dunaway, who does such a brilliant job in the characteristic early '70s film, *Chinatown*.

And each of these performers, has, as I suggested, a sort of grungy, ironized, non-heroic relationship to the iconic figures of the Hollywood past. And something of the same thing is true about the kinds of directors and the kinds of films that emerged in this period, as well. It's the period in which some directors who then became dominant figures over the next 30 years, Martin Scorsese, Roman Polanski, Alan J. Pakula, Francis Ford Coppola, Sam Peckinpah, Altman himself, Stanley Kubrick.

All of these really distinctive, auteurist directors emerge decisively in this period. And again, the films that they make have a kind of personal stamp that would not have been possible in the studio era. And of course, what I've left out of the equation in talking about the transformation of American movies, is the reminder that it was in the period from 1950 through the late '60s or early '70s, that the apparatus of the old Hollywood system began to break down. Movies continued to be made, but the old studios by the end of the '60s all really dissolved. The studios no longer held contracts for dozens, if not hundreds, of actors and armies of technicians and so forth.

The mass production system that had been characteristic of Hollywood for most of the 20th century had broken down by the end of the '70s. And what movie is really had become, essentially, were deals. You've got a bankable star to agree to a script. You get the screenwriter to agree to do the work. You go to the money man and you say, I've got Nicholson and I've got this screenwriter, how about if we go ahead on the movie.

Very different from the days in which the studio bosses would sit down and say, we have to produce x number of films this year. Let's decide how many Westerns, how many comedies we want to make. Let's decide how we want to use Barbara Stanwyck this year, that sort of thing. That game is all over. So that from the economic circumstances and the physical ways



in which movies are made have undergone a transformation, as well. Every movie becomes a kind of major product.

And even though the studio names survive beyond the 1960s, they're just names. They're just labels now. They actually no longer represent what they had in the studio era. Not only a particular number of films that each studio would pump out each year, but holdings in land and major movie studios with all the supporting material and personnel necessary to run a systematic operation for the mass production of movies. That game is over really by the time the '70s began.

And if you actually look at the physical appearance of the actors of this period, you could see that they look less grand. They look less large. They literally are often not as tall. Dustin Hoffman's a shrimp, is even shorter than I am. When he acts with some female stars, they have to put him on a box so it doesn't look like he's too small. They don't photograph the box, of course. And there's something, not exactly wimpish, but ironic or outlawish, an unwholesomeness over a nervousness or a sense of explosive anger-- the Nicholson character is a wonderful instance of that-- might emerge. These qualities, the instability of the idea of the hero is part of what is emerging in these periods.

And I have another clip I want to show you that I think and capture another part of this. It will also illustrate the new sort of grungy type hero and movie star who emerges in this period. But it will also tell you something else about the way in which these transformations and subversions were expressed in films, themselves. And this is a clip from the end of another Robert Altman movie, made roughly around the same time. It's also a genre film. And like *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, it's a kind of anti-genre film. It uses the trappings of a traditional genre, but he turns those trappings askew in ways that make the audience nervous, in ways that depart, from not just the standard expectations of the genre, but even the moral assumptions that are made by the genre.

In this case, the moral assumption that is at most decisively undercut, as you'll see, has to do with the moral rectitude of the hero, himself. And this expresses itself all the way through many of these stories and many of these films, but it often expresses itself with particular clarity in the endings of films.

So watch for the kind of actor that Elliot Gould is, because he's the star, he plays the detective

in this sequence. I want you to look now, at the final, really sort of the climactic sequence-- the dramatic ending-- of an Altman detective film. A remake of a film by the same title, based on a novel by the same title, going back into the '20s. It's a film entitled *The Long Goodbye*.

And it stars Raymond Chandler's most famous private eye figure. This private eye figure had been played in the past, by a series of really, sort of tough guy, Hollywood leads. And in Altman's version of *The Long Goodbye*, I think Robert Mitchum, in fact, a very hulk, bulky kind of tough, studly kind of actor had played the role at least once, previously. In Altman's version of the film, Elliot Gould plays the roll.

And Eliot Gould is a kind of-- as some of you know if you've seen his acting-- is an actor for the modern age in some ways. He talks to himself a lot. He always a kind of anti-heroic demeanor. So, remember we've said also that the endings of genre forms are often very conventionalized. Think about the endings of situation comedy, as an example. Or the way in which, at the end of certain forms of melodrama, you expect certain forms of reassurance. That things will work out, or have worked out, right. One of the fundamental functions of the happy ending of most genre forms in the classic age of Hollywood was precisely to return us to that form of reassurance.

All right, so here is the ending of a detective film called *The Long Goodbye*, starring Elliot Gould. And perhaps the only thing I need to do to introduce the scene, is to simply say that the detective's quest has led him, finally, at the end of the film, to sort of solve the mystery. And he's found the man who has committed the horrendous crimes he's been investigating through the film. And the man turns out to have been a friend of his, someone he has known. And in fact, someone who had taken advantage of him. And here's the very end of the film.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

-How you doing, Terry?

-Marlowe?

I guess if anybody's going to track me down, it'd be you. Want a drink or something?

-No, I don't want no drink.

-You get a kick out of that medicine I sent ya?

-Yeah, I got a big kick out of it. So you murdered your wife, huh Terry? -Well I killed her, but you can't call it murder. Wade told her about Eileen and me, she started screaming. She was gonna tell the cops. She knew I was carrying money for Augustine. She was gonna turn me in. I hit her. I didn't try to kill her, I hit her. I didn't mean it!

-I saw the photographs, boy. You bashed your face in.

She didn't give me any choice!

-You didn't have much choice, huh? So you used me.

-The hell, that's what friends are for, I was in a jam. Come on, have a drink. I had a dead wife, \$350,000 that doesn't belong to me, I had to get out. It's as simple as that.

-Simple as that, huh?

-Goddamn simple. Cops have me legally dead. Augustine's got his money, he's not looking for me anymore. I got a girl that loves me. I got more money than Sylvia and Augustine put together. What the hell, nobody cares.

-Yeah, nobody cares but me.

-Well, that's you Marlowe. You'll never learn, you're a born loser.

-Yeah, I even lost my cat.

[END PLAYBACK]

**DAVID**

**THORBURN:**

Pretty shocking. The hero of the movie-- the protagonist-- the guy we identify with all the way through commits cold-blooded murder. He's a vigilante-- commits cold blooded murder at the end of the film. And that is the end of the film. He gets away with it. So there is a kind of justice done at the end of the film in a kind of narrow way, because the murderer is caught and punished.

And incidentally, this violates what happens in the original novel. It violates what happens in the first film version of the novel. But think what happens to genre forms, not only when the

hero or the protagonist becomes grungy ironic and anti-heroic in his behavior and demeanor. And then when the story itself begins to undermine the deepest assumptions about heroism and righteous behavior that seem to justify or undergird these endings.

But in a way, one could say it's a happy ending if one has a very austere notion of justice. An almost inhuman notion of justice. But what about this protagonist who does his own vigilante justice. And when the film first appeared-- it's impossible to exaggerate the effect this shocking and had.

One reason it's so shocking of course, is that the generic expectations run so totally in the opposite direction-- that the most cold blooded murder in the film should be the character with whom you've identified all the way through. Who is supposed to be solving the crime and bringing evil to justice should turn out to be evil himself in such a shocking and brutal way undermines some of the most up the basic assumptions you make about the kind of safety that the genre of the detective story seems to afford to its viewer.

And this is not an isolated instance, as you'll see in tonight's film. Altman does almost exactly the same thing with the Western that he does in *The Long Goodbye* to the detective story. I'll return tonight to say a little bit more about the particular ways in which *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* embodies this notion I've been suggesting to you. Embodies the anti-generic or subversive principles of the kinds of movies that begin to emerge at the end of the '60s and in the 1970s.

Well I've already talked to you about the social history of the '60s and '70s. And I don't want to repeat myself, but there were some things that I left out in my quick account earlier. So let's return briefly to remember the sequence of presidents. Because of course, the sequence of presidents-- Kennedy, who was assassinated in the early '60s, right. Already, the social fabric in the United States was frayed to the point of breaking by the end of the '60s. Those of us who lived through it will always remember it as an astonishingly polarized time.

And in the progression from Kennedy to Johnson to Nixon, there is a social history in which that change in the society is of course, implied. And of course, it concludes in a way, with the terrible event of the Watergate scandal-- the Watergate investigations-- in which for the first time in our history, a sitting president resigned. And so you can see that the outward social-- and of course, the Watergate scandal raised doubts about the probity and decency of the highest officers of our government.

And while that might not seem so surprising in the age of-- I have to avoid offending some of you-- in our current situation, where it isn't that difficult to doubt what we're told by our government leaders, it's important to recognize that-- not that this was a new experience for Americans, governments always lie-- but there really was a sense of disillusionment with the fundamental structures of the society that was emerging. Because of the Civil Rights Movement. Then because of the well because of the war in Vietnam.

And then also, as a kind of icing on the cake in a certain sense, a kind of terrible addition to this weakening the country, but strengthening this sense of polarization and disturbances, if nothing can be trusted. As if our structures are falling apart or are endangered in some way was the fact the president, in effect resigned, rather than face impeachment. Because of his behavior in the Watergate business.

So the highest levels of government and the fundamental structures of government were in play. And it would obviously, in such a time, it's not inappropriate. You would expect the central story forms of a culture to reflect some disturbance. But why is it not sufficient simply to urge this social history argument? To explain what happened to movies?

The simplest answer is, if you look at what was on television at the same time, you can certainly see television becoming more complex. In fact, the late '60s and early '70s are a transforming moment for television, as well. Partly because that's the moment when television consciously realized that it has a more central place in the society than the movies did. It had, for awhile, already achieved this. But no one on either side of the divide fully recognized it.

But by the late '60s and early '70s, American television now knows itself to be the central medium of consensus narrative. The society recognizes that the changes occur. I don't mean that legislation is passed, I mean this understanding slowly dawns over a period of time, right. And there was a great sense among filmmakers of liberation and freedom. And they're not wrong about that. I mean, one might argue that the '70s is the greatest decade of all in the history of American movies. So many remarkable films were made in that time.

And surely, one of the reasons for it was film was liberated from the necessity to embrace what we're ultimately, although very generous principles, they were still in the end, conservative principles. About how a story in a consensus medium can be told, right.

But the reason that the social history argument is insufficient for explaining the way movies

changed, is that if you look at television you could state a story system that's telling stories that are more complex, and more ironized, and do raise certain kinds of questions about the social and political order that might be thought to be disturbing, and even potentially subversive. But on television, the center holds. On television, the endings remain happy, or at least reassuring, mostly.

On television, some of the very same genre forms, especially detective and cop shows, are all over the place. The fables of law and order. Fables of injustice. And the stories that are being told on television do not have the subversive, completely, anti-generic energies that we're being told on television. Why not? And again, my answer is the movies have been supplanted by television. That consensus role is now being played by television.

And one, quite, I think, truly dramatic way in which we can recognize this development is to talk about the differences between the movie version and the television version of another Robert Altman text. One of his distinctive films of the 1970s, the movie, *MASH*. How many of you have seen Altman's *MASH*? Only two, three, not very many.

But it's a significant film. Not as remarkable, I think, in its full shape as the film you're going to see tonight. But a very, very remarkable film. How many of you have seen the television show, *MASH*. A much larger number. But still, for an American environment, a very small number. Especially because the show was on for, in its original run, for something-- I forgot-- like 11 years. It's one of the longest running shows American history. And then of course, it was in re-run for more than a decade in virtually every market in the United States.

So there's hardly anyone over the age of probably 15 or 20 in the United States who hasn't seen many episodes of *MASH*. So it's somewhat surprising that only a minority of you have seen it. But we can take the difference between the television version of that story and the movie version as a kind of emblem for this transformation that I've been talking about. And you don't have to see either of the films fully to see what I have in mind.

Elliot Gould, the character that you saw just a moment to go in the clip from *The Long Goodbye*, is one of the central doctors in the movie. And the other doctor, the partner doctor, characters that are played by Alan Alda and a comrade, who changes over the course of the full run of the show in the series.

Elliot Gould plays that character in the movies and his partner-- also varies in the film-- but his most decisive partner is Donald Sutherland. And Donald Sutherland is another of these sort of ironic, anti-heroic actors.

They're often actors whose diction is odd. They mumble and they swallow their words. They're sometimes literally harder to hear than their elocutionarily superior-- bad adverb-- than their better spoken ancestors in the classic age of Hollywood.

The movie *MASH* came out in 1970 and it was a kind of disguised Vietnam fable, it was officially based on a novel describing a MASH unit-- a medical unit-- in the Korean War. And the movie dealt with the Korean War too, ostensibly. But it was clearly a metaphor for the current war that we were in.

And the doctors, especially the two central characters played by Elliot Gould and Donald Sutherland, are unbelievably subversive figures. They take their energies more from the counterculture than they do from any other source. They have no respect for authority at all. They engage in forms of subversive monkey business, all the way through the Altman version of *MASH*.

When the movie is translated a year or two later, still while the Vietnam War is on-- onto American television in 1972, I guess--

And the series are oddly quite a lot different. It does still mobilize certain anti-war sentiments, of course.

But, the television program-- which I think in an artistic sense is probably over the long run of its series better than the movie for all kinds of reasons, partly because the characters evolve and change over time in the series in a way that could not in the movie-- but the most decisive thing about it is that the television series retains some of the qualities that we associate with an anti-genre form. There are subversive implications in it, for sure. But the center holds in the television version. Why?

When I say the center holds, what I mean is that the remains in the film are respect for the larger structures of authority and order in a society, however antic and subversive the doctors might behave in any particular instance.

The literal behavior of the characters is often less grungy and doesn't work with pornography on the television show as it does in the movie. I don't mean that the movie is pornographic, but it's much more overt about sexual matters than the more than the television series is.

And one of the best ways one can see the contrast is to contrast an actor like Alan Alda with an actor like Elliot Gould. There's something dark and grungy and self-reflective, self-aware about Elliot Gould that one doesn't feel about Alda. Alda is much easier in his skin than Elliot Gould. One feels about Elliot Gould as about many of the actors that emerges-- dominant stars in the '70s and beyond-- is that they're afflicted by a kind of cosmic anxiety. That they're anxious figures, that they're figures of damage, in some way.

Warren Beatty is such an actor in many ways. He's the star of tonight's film, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*. There's a particularly wonderful film of the 1970s that I also want to mention to you after I complete my discourse about *MASH*. So these two versions of *MASH* then, sort of dramatize for us, not that television becomes-- especially by 1970-- simply a reactionary medium that just repeats what the ruling class in the United States wants to say. It's a much more complicated medium than that. But it is a consensus medium. It understands that it operates according to certain unwritten rules that the society, as a whole, has accepted.

And one of those rules is that in a consensus medium, you can mobilize all kinds doubts, and dubieties, and ironic perspectives on the larger culture are on the central values of the culture. But you can't repudiate them completely. You can't let people come out of a consensus medium thinking that the society is totally corrupt. That there's no hope for the world.

Consensus systems won't allow that. They have a comes a kind of aesthetic and political conservatism built into them. And the movie *MASH* shows how free it is of those consensus values. The television show *MASH*, on the contrary, demonstrates how much pressure a particular genre may receive and still remain, in some sense, a consensus form. And it seems to me, there are many arguments to be made for the idea that *MASH* is one of the most distinctive artistic achievements of American television. That it represents the culmination, in some sense of series traditions that go back almost 30 years by the time *MASH* appears.

But what gives it its real authority and power is that incorporates into itself a subject matter that, before the mid '60s, anyway had never been on television before. So it's not that the



television that appears in the late '60s early '70s is trivial or foolish, it's just that it is constrained by these consensus principles that no longer constrain the American movie. And when we look at tonight's film, you'll see very decisive examples of this. And I'm excited about how clearly *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* will crystallize the kinds of things I've been saying to you this afternoon.

Now I also want to mention this other example. A film I meant to mention earlier when I was going through these notions about the way in which we have different kinds of directors, different kinds of actors, different kinds of endings, right. Which means that the style of the movies is often different, as well. The visual texture of the film is-- they favor jump cuts and discontinuity tricks much more than the classic Hollywood movie does.

And the film I wanted to tell you about is a film-- I meant to mention earlier and I'll conclude today's lecture with sort of another example, like the examples I've given so far-- in which what we get is it a profoundly subversive film. Whose presence would have been impossible five years earlier, or 10 years earlier, when the movies were still performing their consensus function in American society. The film I'm thinking about as a film by the director, Alan J Pakula, some people call him Alan Peculiar, called *The Parallax View*.

Any of you seen *The Parallax View*? It's one of the great films of this early '70s period. And it's a conspiracy fantasy film.

Warren Beatty plays the central character in the film, a drunk. And fact that he's a drunkard and radically imperfect person, is also characteristic of the kinds of heroes-- a protagonist-- that we begin to see in the '70s and beyond. Radically imperfect protagonists begin to become much more the norm in American movies after the Hollywood system has declined.

Well in this film, Warren Beatty plays a recovered alcoholic journalist, who has been fired from a series of important jobs and is now working for a minor newspaper in Seattle, Washington. His name is Frady. F-R-A-I-D-Y, I think, or maybe it's F-R-A-D-Y, but it's supposed to echo afraid. He's like a fraidy cat. you're supposed to sort of partly feel in the film.

And with the help of a newspaper editor he works for, he stumbles upon what turns out to be a vast political conspiracy. He's actually present in the beginning of the film, at what looks like a random killing of a political candidate. Begins to investigate, he discovers in fact, that there was probably conspiracy. The candidate was assassinated. And then he goes undercover and

he engages in a long investigation.

The shape of the film, and the energies of the film, are very like dozens of films we've seen earlier, especially during the Hollywood era. In which a lone hero, discovering terrible facts that are dangerous to his community or his society, shows the courage and the fortitude and the end resilience, and the focus, to follow through and solve the mystery and then save the world. In the most elaborate versions of this fantasy, what's at stake is the fate of the world or the fate of a society. In smaller versions, it might be something somewhat less.

And that's what it turns out here. He penetrates into this conspiracy and there are allusions and references that make you-- especially at the end of the film-- associate the conspiracy with the Kennedy assassination. There is, in the film then, a kind of ongoing process in which the full nature of the conspiracy begins to emerge. And in fact, it is an unbelievable. If you actually saw the world in that way you probably couldn't even get a job in the White House. I'm sorry.

But said it's really an unbelievably conspiratorial film, in which it turns out that there are a sort of network of corporate controllers who are sort of, in effect, taking over the government of the United States. And they have unbelievable power nobody knows-- but anyway. This detective has finally uncovered the plot and watch him do it. And as the film comes to its conclusion, what do we expect will happen? What's the normal expectation in such a film? That his revelations will save the day, right.

Well in the very final sequences of this film, we see what looks like a kind of revelation scene, in which our character, Frady, is in a convention hall where they're about to hold the political nominating convention in fact. It's very resonant because the conspirators are trying to control that space as well. And essentially, he starts chasing a bad guy, being chased by a bad guy, without going into any detail-- I'll spoil the film for you a little in a way, I must-- guess what happens. Our hero is killed at the end.

And the film ends with the idea that the conspiracy is enforced. That there's been no change. So, it would have been a disturbing film, even if it had ended with the requisite happy ending and a reassuring ending.

And in and how many films does the great hero, the character you've been following all the

way through, who's supposed to be one in which you've invested all your sympathy and respect. In how many films does this guy get blown away at the end. But it's a mark of how subversive, how morally turbulent, and politically and morally engaged movies had become by the early '70s, that's such an was possible.

So, *The Parallax View* is another kind of anti-genre in a way. It's like a spy film-- in some ways it's like one of those Hitchcock romantic thrillers, in which Cary Grant and a beautiful woman travel through beautiful locales and finally, even though they look as if they're in great danger, win the day and are able to marry at the end then also incidentally, have saved the United States government. The film fits that kind of category, but it explodes all of our expectations about the characters and about the atmosphere of such films.

And in that sense, *The Parallax View*, like *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, like Altman's film *MASH*, like his film *Nashville*, like the films of Martin Scorsese that appear-- *Mean Streets*, his first film and maybe his greatest film appears in this period as well-- have given you a much grungier, more disturbed, more damaged, more hopeless view of urban violence than any film before it had done. Again, mobilizing the genres of the gangster film and the urban crime film. But mobilizing it in a way that leaves the viewer unsettled and disturbed.

So the '70s is an astonishing, remarkable moment in the history of American film. It's remarkable, not only because films became more courageous and more dangerous in the thematic and moral sense, but also because it was an era in which that happened in consequence of the fact that the movies had surrendered their central place in American society to this new medium of television. I'll talk about some of these matters tonight in a much more concrete way by looking closely at *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*.