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**PROFESSOR:**

Good evening, people. I want to continue our discussion of the end of the studio era, the advent of the kind of much freer, more independent, more politically and even morally liberated movies that appear after the Hollywood dispensation has subsided.

But remember that I've also been suggesting to you that even though there's a certain sense in which a kind of artistic freedom was now granted to directors and to American films, and on balance I think most scholars and film buffs looking at the 1970s would certainly share my sense that it's a very remarkable decade.

But I think they might also share my sense that the films had given up more than they realized, certainly more than they were conscious of, that the shift in what we might call the media ecology of the society, which enabled this level of freedom for movies, also carried with it a tremendous cost.

And remember how decisive the numbers are. I've mentioned them a few times in this course. At the height of the studio era, 2/3 of the country is going to the movies every week. It's an habitual experience for most Americans, both adults and children, really.

By the time this system comes to an end, by the time the movies have been, as I've suggested several times in the course, supplanted by television as the new central storytelling system of the society, by the time that occurs at the end of the '60s, most Americans are going to the movies only once a year. And it's only particular subcultures-- teenagers, for example, who make a regular habit of going to the movies.

And a good deal of the triviality and superficiality of movies of many of the box office successes of the '80s and '90s from the American film industry is a direct function of the fact that the audience had dwindled from the whole society to particular subsets of the society. And the consequences for the nature of-- the movie's sense of its connection to the society are powerful, are profound.

Well, we're going to explore aspects, finally-- our final exploration of aspects of this topic

comes in tonight's lecture, and especially in the exemplary early 1970s film *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* that we're going to screen for you after my lecture. I want to begin by talking a little bit about Robert Altman's career. And I'll actually look at certain specific films and say a few things about them in a minute.

But first let me talk about what I take to be some of his-- not only the only ones, but some of his defining qualities as a director-- signature features of his work. The first and most obvious to me is what we might call his moral skepticism. He really is in some respects temperamentally an outsider.

And it's interesting to speculate, I think, about what might have happened to Robert Altman, an immensely gifted natural filmmaker, had he been born a generation earlier and had to actually struggle with the requirements and responsibilities, the confinements of the studio system. But luckily for Altman, he emerges in the time when the tyranny of the studios and also the creative input of the studios has disappeared, has gone away.

And in that sense, he represents a new kind of independent spirit in filmmaking. And he resembles some of the other directors who come of age at roughly the same time, directors some of whom I mentioned this afternoon, like Scorsese or Coppola or Alan Pakula.

So one of his defining qualities is a kind of moral skepticism, a kind of sympathy, we might call it, which is connected to what we might call his sympathy for the marginal. Over and over again in Altman's films, we focus on either marginal figures who are reluctantly or inadequately part of a larger community, or we focus on a community that itself is so dubious as a community, so damaged as a community, so enfeebled and unlike the traditional communities that it's as if the community he treats itself, the societies or groupings that he finds interesting, are also in some deep way non-traditional communities.

And in fact, in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, most of the supporting cast were literally members of a commune. They were members of the counterculture. The ballad that is sung by the great balladeer, American singer Leonard Cohen in the beginning of the film, would have struck knowledgeable viewers as a deeply subversive gesture.

Because think how often the Western begins with a ballad, with someone saying a ballad, as if the stories of the West have become so mythological that they're part of our song tradition, our musical tradition-- which is true-- as well as our narrative tradition. And many, many classic

Westerns begin with a ballad of some kind. *The Searchers* has such a ballad, in fact, as I hope you noticed. Well, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* begins with a ballad, as you'll see.

But it's a subversive ballad. It's sung by a man, Leonard Cohen, who's deeply associated with marijuana, with the counterculture, with striking out against authority, with writing anti-war songs. And there's a kind of countercultural ambience, a kind of countercultural skepticism and sympathy for the margins in nearly all of Robert Altman's work.

So his moral skepticism then could be said to have at least two dimensions. One is what we might call an aesthetic dimension, in which he is skeptical about the inherited strategies, belief systems, and even structures of earlier movies. And he actually is in that sense aesthetically subversive, although very subtly so, as I hope you'll see in tonight's film. He'll very often give you a film that seems on the surface to sustain and to recreate all the classic conventions of the genre in which he's working.

And it's only when you look a little bit more closely that you realize that although the structural elements are there, they have been perverted or inverted so that they have in some sense enacted some kind of moral migration and stand for virtually alternative beliefs, assumptions, or values from what they normally are taken to stand for in the classic genre films on which Altman is borrowing, or against which he is engaged in a kind of mockery or at least hostile action of some kind. And I think that *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* demonstrates this very dramatically, although most of Altman's films have these qualities in some degree.

The second quality of his moral skepticism is what would be not now related to his aesthetic principles, to his filmmaking practice, but would be more broadly associated with politics, with his general ideological view of the world. And even there, especially there maybe, Altman styled himself a rebel. Even when he was successful in Hollywood in his early career when he was so-- *MASH* was a box office success. And the decade of 1970 through '80 is probably the richest decade of Altman's career.

And in that time, even though Altman was very successful, later he fell into disfavor with the Hollywood bosses and he spent some period of his career underground in a way, either not making movies at all-- directing plays in various places or making documentary films or private films that were not released commercially. Then he has a resurgence later, before the end of his life. The last 10 or 15 years of his life again involve successes at the box office.

So the second aspect of his moral skepticism might be a kind of political skepticism, and a

political skepticism both against the Hollywood system and then against the larger political structures of the society. Now remember, his political subversiveness comes at a time when many honorable and normal people, including your professor, were subversive in some sense, because it was a time when the country was at war in a war that many people in the country thought was unreasonable and wrong. Many people went to jail or protested the war.

And Altman was on the side of the anti-war forces. He was on the morally skeptical side about wars of choice in foreign environments. So he was both politically and culturally a skeptic and aesthetically a skeptic. And both qualities show up in his films in all kinds of remarkable ways.

I've talked about how that leads to a kind of sympathy for marginality, for the condition of marginality and for characters who belong on the margins of the society, who live on the margins. And he loved to make films often about certain kinds of human communities, subsets, small versions of human society comprised entirely of misfits and marginal characters. And he even has a sympathy for what we might think of as unconventional appearance, so that many of the actors and especially the secondary background actors in his films might actually be in ads for grotesquerie.

He loves the grotesque. And at least his background characters often have a sort of grotesque element. There's a love of the weird and the strange in Altman that you can feel in his films, in his casting and in his subject matter.

Another thing that I would identify as a kind of defining quality for Robert Altman is the relation in his films, especially his mature films, between plot and character. There's a tendency-- it's an aspect of his skepticism. He doesn't like structures that control him.

And from one angle, if you think about storytelling or narrative, plot is a kind of controlling feature, especially if you allow the plot to take the foreground of the-- to assume a position in the foreground of the text, the plot can become a kind of iron hand, controlling the choices the director makes, controlling what can happen to the characters. And certain forms of action adventure-- what happens next, the sequence of events and the visual excitement of watching those events, is virtually the only interest you have in film.

Those totally plot-oriented films tend to have stereotyped or flat characters in them. But Altman, even when he embraces certain genre principles that require what looks like a conventional linear plot, often tries to subvert the linearity of his plot. There's a kind of digressive or dissenting, nonlinear tendency in Altman's work.

You can sense it in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, although it doesn't emerge totally fully until later in his career, a little bit later in his career. The fullest embodiment of this non-plot principle, of this preference for character over plot, I think is probably the film *Nashville* in 1975, in which Altman displays an immense range of characters to us and skips from one character to another to another. There are certain centers of interest.

They seem to have no connection to each other, and you sit there in the film-- when the film first came out, it actually elicited a number of negative reviews from reviewers who were angry about the fact that the film took virtually its whole length to make clear that in fact there was a connection between these characters. The complaint against the film was it was plotless. Well, that wasn't exactly true. It wasn't like plotless. In fact, all the lines of the plot do come together toward the end of the film.

But the truth is that Altman is at least as interested in digression as he is in linear progression. And there is a sense in which his films like to pause and savor what's going on around them. And as you're watching *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, one of the things you might ask yourself at a certain level is what's the throughline of the story?

In fact, it feels when you're watching *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* as if it doesn't have at least a conventional Western plot. As the film goes on, you begin to realize, yes, the story here is about the growth of this town. In that sense, the film really is a founding myth, an ironic, mocking, founding myth.

But while you're watching the film, you're interested in McCabe and you're interested in some of the other minor characters in the town. But it's hard to identify what the actual subject of the film is, at first. Altman likes to leave his audiences in a little bit of confusion of that sort. He doesn't like to satisfy the narrow desire to have a clear, linear plot. He prefers some principles of digression.

And one of the reasons that he does, apart from the fact that he wants to savor the experience of the world and he's attentive to so many aspects of experience that he wants to often bring all of them into the film-- he's very interested in sound, for example, in the way sound operates in the world. And he does odd things with his soundtrack, as you'll see in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. I'll come back to this in a minute. His preoccupation, then, is with trying to create a situation in which character unfolds.

And he'll always sacrifice what a more action-oriented director might think was the most important thing in order to explore character more fully. Now, one very broad way of dividing narratives, as I may have suggested earlier in the semester to you, is a distinction between plot-driven and character-driven stories.

And one of the things one can see happening in Altman's film-- again, it's another marker of the fact that Altman is operating in a cinematic environment that no longer has the conservative aesthetic constraints that are placed upon a consensus system. So can explore these kinds of possibilities more fully than-- or can explore them at all, in fact. In some cases, he couldn't have even looked down these territories, looked down these pathways if he'd been a conventional studio director.

So a distinctive feature, then, of the way he works is this tension between plot and character and the emphasis that Altman will almost always put on character, the way he'll even subvert your interest in what is going to happen next some time in the film. And as you're watching *McCabe* you might sort of think about that. You don't ever feel that the film is flagging. You always are interested in what happens.

But after a while, you suddenly realize that you're not being carried along by the momentum of story itself in the way you are in a normal film, or what you would think of as a conventional film. And *McCabe* is only a minor version of this. As I say, *Nashville* is a much more dramatic instance of this.

Finally, another distinctive-- not unique, but distinctive feature of Altman's work-- and this occurs, especially powerfully as his career continues. You can sense it earlier, but it actually becomes a dominant topic later in his career after he's very successful. He has great confidence in himself.

By the last decade of his life, he is conceived of, I think, as a master movie maker. And he finds it very easy to get people to appear in his films. And that's where this principle comes in most fully. He's interested in blurring the distinction between fiction and reality.

And in fact, in some of his films, I think *Nashville* is the first one in which this happens. And then he returns to this trick or this strategy much later in his career in a whole series of films. In *Nashville* there are some performers who are playing themselves. They're not fictional characters.

Some of them are famous singers and so forth. And they appear as themselves. *Nashville* is about the American music scene, and also about the turmoil of American society in the 1970s. And so many of the people who appear in the film are playing musicians, singers, songwriters, and performers.

But there are actually some real performers who are recognized by the audience because they're relatively famous, who play themselves. This blurring of the distinction of the difference between fiction and reality, this mingling of fictional with real characters becomes a very distinctive feature of Altman's work later in his career. And very quickly then, what I'd like to do is show you a list of some of his films. You can put that up now, Greg.

I want to say something about all of them. This is not a full list of his films. And you can see, there's a long interregnum of almost a decade where he makes some films. I just haven't bothered to list them. This is not a complete listing of his films, although I think it is a complete listing of his films made in the 1970s.

And I did that partly because I wanted you to see what a prolific and productive decade this was for Altman, but also because I thought you might be interested in seeing how many titles register with you. Even if you're not seen the films, you've probably have heard of some of these films, because they are among the most innovative and important American films of the second half of the 20th century.

I want to say a couple of things about some of these films. You've already seen the ending of *The Long Goodbye* and you know what a deeply subversive version of the detective genre that film is. I want to say a word about *California Split*, because in some ways it's a film that most fully embodies this principle of being interested in the marginal.

*California Split* is a gambler's movie. And Eliot Gould, that sort of shuckin' and jivin' figure of anti-heroic irony that you saw at the end of *The Long Goodbye* is the star of *California Split* as well. And almost the entire film-- a large part of the film actually takes place at the race track and in gambling environments.

The climax of the film is a trip to Las Vegas, where our hero has a tremendous run of luck, nearly breaks the bank. And *California Split* follows the fortunes of these two gamblers. It's hard even fully to follow the chronology of the film. Sometimes you lose sense of how much time has passed.

There are many things about the characters that are vague and unclear. It's also a film-- parenthetically-- this is a trivial detail, but it's always struck me as a mark of Altman's perversity-- every woman in the film is named Barbara. I especially notice this because my wife is named Barbara. I think the perversity had to do with Altman's idea that I'm creating a kind of slice of life movie.

*Thieves Like Us* is a particularly characteristic Altman film, not only because it has a kind of plotless amorphousness to it when you first look at it, even though it has great excitement in it and a great emphasis on character and a great emphasis on marginal, weird people who sort of are not solid citizens in any way. But it also carries another signature feature of Altman's work, which I did not list on my outline. And that is, he was very prone to allow his actors to improvise when they got in from the camera.

Or not literally when he was shooting, but they would improvise, work something out. He didn't work from a set script, or he would allow departures from his script very easily and quickly. One of the reasons he loved to work with Eliot Gould was Eliot Gould was a particularly gifted, improvisational actor.

And there's a kind of authenticity in the performances in most of Altman's films that partly come from the fact that he was deeply interested in trying to create an illusion of authenticity that was much more intense and much more compelling than what the traditional Hollywood movie offers.

He really wasn't interested in the fancy lighting and the very elaborate patterning of the Hollywood film. He liked grit and dirt and imperfection. And you can feel these elements in his work. And you can especially feel it often in the performances of his actors. The ones who liked working with him really loved it, because it gave them a significant creative part in the film itself.

So *Thieves Like Us* is a relatively minor Altman film in certain ways, but it shows his interest in character, his lack of interest in plot, and his love of the marginal, and of course of improvisational performance. I've mentioned *Nashville* already. Maybe I should say a little bit more about it, simply because it really was an unbelievably influential film.

The film seemed to desert conventional plot, and almost in an arbitrary way for its first half, simply to look at various characters who had musical ambitions and were bound for Nashville. That was sort of the only throughline in the film. Everyone's going to *Nashville*. And you really



wondered as you were watching the film, what could these characters possibly have to do with each other? Will they ever come together?

Should they come together? It's a very artful film in part because of the way it plays with the reader's frustration about a linear plot. And in fact, one of the things the movie does is it makes you aware as a viewer of the extent to which a linear plot is a kind of crutch you lean on when you're watching a movie. It helps you sort of get through the film.

If you're confused about other stuff, you always have that throughline to grasp onto. And when Altman takes that away from you, or seems to take it away from you, he immerses you in the moral texture of his movie, in the psychological and political meanings of his movies in a way that would not be true if you were fixated on what happens next, what happens next, what happens next.

I want to say a couple of words. I've mentioned *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* to you earlier. And it's one of his most subversive Westerns. It's interesting that he went back to the Western genre in this very creative period of his career. And I think one of the reasons was he understood that there were aspects of the genre he hadn't made enough fun of.

He hadn't quite ruined all the sacred truths, to use a phrase that I'm going to refer to later that I have on my outline for *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. So he wanted to return again. And that of course is the story about those Wild West shows I spoke about last week.

And the episode he dramatizes actually involves a comical and also very disturbing confrontation or interaction between Great Chief Sitting Bull and drunken Buffalo Bill, and an absolutely corrupt, drunken morally muddled Indian hero, played by incidentally Paul Newman, who had played upright heroes frequently before.

And let me jump down a little bit and say one word. The films I've listed from '88 on are more recent films, all of them relative successes. My view is that his greatest work is in the '70s. But these later films I've listed are interesting. But I want to say a word about *Tanner* and *Tanner on Tanner*, because they show how imaginative and experimental he remained, even in his later years as a director.

As some of you may know, *Tanner* is not a movie. It was a television series. And it was a very interesting television series in which we could see Robert Altman further developing this interest he had in this confusion between reality and fiction. I think he was right about this in

some ways.

Partly, I think, he felt that because we live in such a media-saturated culture and because of the power that celebrity seems to exercise in our culture, this celebrity was often one of Robert Altman's subplots. It's a key subject in *Nashville* and he returns to it in a number of his later films as well. The trick of *Tanner* is that it purports to be a documentary following a Democratic presidential candidate in the Democratic primaries of 1988.

And you've got an actor, one of his favorite actors-- this actor-- I think his name is Michael Murphy, he has a role in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. He's the younger company representative who comes near the end of the film to negotiate with McCabe about selling his interest in the town.

And he's a wonderful actor, this guy Michael Murphy. And like many of the actors who appear in Altman's films, you have a sense, if you watch Altman's films over the whole of his career, that there was a repertory company that kept coming back to work with him again and again. Eliot Gould must be in six or seven of his movies, Michael Murphy in at least three or four.

He has favorite actresses too, who love to work with him, and Julie Christie is one, the star of tonight's film. Warren Beatty is another of his favorite actors, although Beatty was such a big star that could generate his own films. He didn't need Altman as much as some of these other actors did.

In any case, the trick of *Tanner*, the strategy of *Tanner*, the really memorable thing about *Tanner* was, I think, a very significant television event, is that the fictional Tanner, played by this guy Michael Murphy, treated with complete seriousness. We mostly saw him through the eyes of his press managers, his press handlers.

So there was a great cynicism about the political process and the gossip of journalists about the presidential candidate. But the real genius of *Tanner* was that we saw Tanner on the stump with the real presidential candidates. And they cooperated. The real presidential candidates cooperated in the making of the film.

And there are actually scenes in which the fictional Tanner gets into a conversation with Michael Dukakis, who was also running to be President. And then there's an interview with Michael Dukakis in which Michael Dukakis assesses the danger that Tanner represents to his candidacy. So when he returned to *Tanner on Tanner* in 2004, he elaborated this theory.

Now Tanner is a retired politician, and he's helping his daughter, who's a documentary filmmaker, do a new political film. But now it's about the contemporary. It was about the last election, the nomination. I guess it was the first Bush election was what it was about. And it's very interesting. He brings back many of the characters.

Well, both of these texts, like some of his other films, are really preoccupied with the question of the blurred boundaries between the fictional worlds we live in and the actual worlds we eat and breathe in, and the extent to which our media-saturated culture has created a kind of virtual reality that we watch on television. And now, of course, we watch on our computer screens that competes with the actual reality we live every day. Well, Altman loved playing games with that question and raising questions about it.

And the first Tanner series is, among other things, a powerful meditation on the mendacity and the stupidity of the political process in our country. It showed people trying to raise money, candidates scrambling to get five minutes in front of the news cameras just at the moment when the evening news is going to break, that sort of thing. It's very wonderfully accurate, cynical account of American politics.

Well, let me turn now to *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and try to concretize some of what I've been saying with specific reference to this remarkable film. "Ruin the sacred truths," a line that I have plagiarized from the Yale literary critic and scholar Harold Bloom, who uses it to describe the enterprise of certain romantic poets whose aim was said, in Bloom's terms, to ruin the inherited truths of the society, to attack them, to assault them.

And in a certain sense, one could say that that's Altman's ambition as well, to ruin, to expose, to undermine, to drench in irony the secret truths that have come down to us from cinematic tradition, and maybe from more political and moral culture as well.

And we can see this in many different aspects of Altman's movie. In many of his films we feel these elements, but especially powerfully and especially clearly, I think, in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. One might say, in fact, that the whole energy of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, the whole energy of the film, results in a kind of tension or clash between the conventional expectations that we have about Westerns, and even the conventional expectations as they have been complicated by the serious and enlarging and already ironic Westerns of the late '50s and early '60s, a kind of tension or clash between the expectations we have about traditional Westerns, no matter how ironic they might have been, and the gritty, comical, uglified, and

humanized reality that Altman actually presents us with.

And almost every element of the film has this kind of shock of recognition in it. Let's take the question-- watch for example, how the film treats both the soundtrack and what you visually see. When the film first came out, some reviewers complained that they had trouble making out the dialogue.

And they weren't lying about this. It's because when Altman takes his camera inside dingy saloon in which some of the action early in the film begins and to which it returns periodically as the film goes on, Altman does not tamp down the ambient noise in the bar. You hear the conversation of other people. You hear bodies moving. You hear various kinds of noise.

And sometimes, if the people who are in the foreground of the frame are talking in very low voices, their voices are blotted out by the sounds around them. And in fact, Altman's treatment of sound all the way through the film has an energetic realism in it.

And it's a strange and ultimately, I think, very satisfying aspect of the film, the way in which Altman seems to try to create a grittier, more accurate account of the way sound operates in our world. The fact is, when we're in actuality and we address someone in a crowded room, it's not quiet. You can hear a lot of other things. Altman wants to sort of recreate that.

And sometimes it almost seems as if that tendency, that digressive tendency that I've said is characteristic of Altman's imagination may even be expressing itself in the way he uses the soundtrack, because it's almost as if the soundtrack may sometimes be more interested in the words or sounds coming from the margins of the frame rather than from the center of the frame. So there are these elements of potential abstraction that you always have to contend with when you're watching Altman's films.

The same thing from another angle could also be said to be true in some degree of the way the images work in the film. Watch especially for the color palette that Altman uses. He plays around with light and dark, with a certain kind of cold, dark, damp feeling. And he contrasts that with a kind of lighting that suggests not incredibly bright sunlight, but a kind of nostalgic, golden, sunset kind of imagery.

And if you watch the film, in the very beginning of the film, one of the things that happens is that sometimes this golden sort of light appears indoors, and the outdoors seem gloomy and dank and dark. And then later in the film, this division between light and dark undergoes an

alteration.

You might ask yourself why. In one of the most dramatic moments toward the end of the film, there is a group of murderers, assassins ride into the town. And they ride in accompanied with the sun behind them, accompanied by this sort of golden haze that Altman has ironically associated with comfort and pleasure earlier in the film.

So both in terms of the sound and the image, we're engaged in something new here. In considering the word "image," I should also mention Altman's montage, Altman's habits of editing. He's capable of the most fluid and undistracted editing if he wants to do it. But he is actually fonder of forms of editing that are abrupt, that are disconcerting, that are mildly disorienting.

And that style is part-- I don't mean does this at all moments of the film. But that style, I think, is part-- sometimes he'll use abrupt cuts. That style is part of his art, I think, but it's also part of this desire not to have things too smooth, not to have things too neat. His love of the apparently imperfect is part of what's operating there.

Even a third element of what I'm calling his special or his new realism might have to do even with the way he treats not just the physical spaces that you see, but even the weather. Watch how lousy the weather is in his film and how much damage it does to people, what an unpleasant thing the weather actually is.

Snow really matters in this film. Bad weather really matters in this film. It affects the outcome of the plot in certain ways, as you'll see. So this messy realism I'm talking about even extends to the way in which the film treats the weather, as you'll see as the film proceeds.

The central features of the traditional Western-- the hero savior figure, the protagonist figure, the gal from the East who is often a schoolmarm who falls in love with the hero, and the idea that the Western as a text, as I've said many times already, is always a kind of founding story about the equation of a community. All of those conventional structures remain in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, but they're reverted. They're weird. Let's take just a quick example.

The character played by Warren Beatty, he really is in some sense the founder of the town. There's a miserable mining camp-- it just has a saloon in it when the film opens. And McCabe arrives. He's the great gambler. He's actually a visionary entrepreneur in a certain way, although in a very ironic sense. The story is an ironic entrepreneur's story, a Horatio Alger

story.

This gambler, McCabe, comes to town, looks the place over, gambles for awhile with these poor schlubs who are suffering on the very margins of civilization and then goes away. When he comes back, he's bringing prostitutes with him. This town is not built by noble intentions. It's built by a whoremonger who brings a bunch of prostitutes into the town and sets up the town's first house of prostitution.

And in fact McCabe becomes the biggest landowner and the richest man in town, not because he has the entrepreneurial vision of an Andrew Carnegie-- although actually, if we look closely at Andrew Carnegie's life, we might find he more resembles McCabe than his biographers have acknowledged. In other words, it's as if what Altman is doing is he's telling a kind of ironic or mocking or antiheroic Horatio Alger story.

And as the story unfolds, certain lovely things begin to happen. One thing that begins to happen is we begin to see a soft or a vulnerable side to the McCabe character. And when the schoolmarm East figure arrives, she's really from the East. She's not even from the East of the United States. She has an English accent.

It's Julie Christie. But she's not a schoolmarm. She's a retired whore who is now a manager of whores. She's a whore mistress, an expert in running whores. And in fact, as soon as she arrives in town and partners with McCabe, McCabe really begins to make money.

What we begin to realize is McCabe really doesn't know what he's doing. McCabe had a kind of vision, but he doesn't really-- and there's a wonderful scene over a meal in which the Julie Christie character who wolfs down her food like some John Wayne character, while the McCabe character looks very askance at her. There's a scene in which Julie Christie in effect explains to McCabe how little he knows about how to manage women.

And then what develops is a kind of love affair between McCabe and this prostitute. And what one begins to realize is first of all, the woman is much smarter than the man. And you can see her despair being generated as the story unfolds and McCabe is manipulated by other people. She knows the powerful forces that McCabe will be up against by the end of the film.

And she tries to discourage him and help him, but he's too caught up in his macho idea of what a man is to allow himself to see the wisdom of what she's saying. And he's actually sometimes embarrassed by the fact that she seems to know more than he does. Well, the

relation between McCabe and Mrs. Miller inverts the normal love affair relationship. It shows us a woman who's stronger and smarter, although also much more cynical and despairing than her man.

But McCabe's optimism and sense of self-confidence, which he loses pretty quickly, is shown in the film to be a function of his ignorance and his innocence. So the treatment of the love story and the treatment of the hero savior figure in the film is deeply humanizing and deeply ironic.

They're actually more credible, psychologically complex characters, these two, McCabe and Mrs. Miller, than most of their predecessors in earlier Westerns. But they're also deeply ironic embodiments of their much nobler ancestors. And the same thing that I've just been saying about the hero and the heroine, about the love story and savior story is also true of the founding myth itself.

The name of this town is Presbyterian Church. Very good name, isn't it? And it takes its name from the steeple of an unfinished church. And I think the allusion to unfinished churches in earlier traditional Westerns is certainly intentional. It takes its name from the unfinished church in the town.

And in fact as you will see, the church is never finished. You might watch how in the plot that works out, and why it works out, and what role the church and especially the minister who is hanging out at the church plays in the outcome of the story. Does the church, and implicitly therefore does religion play a constructive or a destructive role in the film?

I'm not giving too much away to tell you it's obvious which answer is appropriate. It plays a destructive role. Just as it's hostile to certain political myths about the founding of the West, the film is also hostile to our pieties and complacencies about the role of religious institutions, and especially in the founding of our society.

So watch how it works itself out and how that traditional icon of the conventional Western has its meanings and its significance inverted and subverted in this film. There's one crucial film, conventional Western, to which this film directly alludes, I think, or at least implicitly directly alludes.

It alludes to other films as well, but there's one especially. And I want to show you a clip from it, because it has its own distinction. And it reminds you not only about the sort of ballad

dimensions of the Western, but how stylized and heroic in a certain way the conventional Western is.

It'll be a nice contrast with the antiheroic qualities of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. And this is a scene from the very beginning of a film made in the early '50s called *High Noon*, starring the first or second most iconic of Western heroes. If John Wayne was the first, then Gary Cooper was the second. And this stars Gary Cooper. But the main reason I want you to see the opening of the film is because it's very important to *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*.

And there's no doubt that Altman expects his audience not only to be thinking about many prior Westerns to contrast with what happens in this Western, but he certainly expects his audience to remember specifically the beginning of *High Noon* and the way *High Noon* plays itself out. And perhaps also certain other Westerns play maybe almost as significant a role in the film, but *High Noon* especially.

And the main reason that *High Noon* is so important to *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* is that it's also a drama that takes place in the physical spaces of the town. *High Noon* begins brilliantly with bad guys riding into town. And we hardly see the hero until the final images of the sequence I'm going to show you, the Gary Cooper figure. A man's been released from prison who's going to take vengeance on the town marshal.

It's the day of the town marshal's wedding when the bad guys are coming into town to take their revenge. The film itself, incidentally, is a parable of the McCarthy era of the early 1950s. Like many Westerns-- and we've talked about this-- like many Westerns, it's a disguised form of social and political commentary on the present.

And in this case, the marshal's endangered. A lot of bad guys are coming after him. He goes around the town asking for help to set up a posse to help him defend the town. Nobody wants to help him. He's left on his own, and he has to fight against these guys on his own. And the drama of the film has to do with this.

And as you'll see, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* ends on a similar note, in which McCabe is up against a force of men far larger than he, and also professional killers. And in that sense, the end of *McCabe*, the whole last section of *McCabe*, which involves McCabe defending himself against assassins who have been dispatched by a corporation that has tried to buy McCabe out. And when he's refused to sell, they've said, OK, we'll take another route. We'll eliminate him.



So Altman's telling the story of capitalism at its most aggressively evil, instead of the kind of fairy tales that were told about how the West was made by certain mythological, optimistically mythological Westerns. So when McCabe defends himself at the very end against these larger forces, one of the things that gives him an advantage-- and one of the most interesting passages in the film occurs here-- has to do with his knowledge of the town.

He helped build the town. So he knows every nook and cranny of the town. And he's able in part to hold his own against four other men who are actually much better with violence than he is, because of his knowledge of the town. Something of that same kind of thing happens at the end of *High Noon*.

The beginning of *High Noon* is exciting because what it shows is the film is exploring the territory that it will later return to. So I'm showing it to you because I think in part it's interesting. It's a nice contrast. There's no question that Altman expects us to have this film in our minds when we're watching *McCabe*.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

Do any of you recognize this actor? His name is Lee Van Cleef. He played bad guys for most of his career, and then spaghetti westerns came in. He was reversed. He began to play less evil characters. But he's an actor who's associated with evil roles in a series of Westerns.

The singer is Tex Ritter.

I also wanted you to see this beginning so you could hear this ballad and contrast it with Leonard Cohen's stoned aria. Leonard Cohen sounds like he's singing out of the counterculture. And watch the different subject matter.

Only someone who had never seen a movie would fail to recognize that these are bad guys. Now how do you know they're bad guys? They're unshaven. They have black hats. There's a kind of implicit symbolism that the conventional Western, even subtle ones like this one, which is a grownup Western, it's an adult Western, still make use of. Altman will throw all those kinds of markers out. He thinks they're foolish. Another church.

[CHURCH BELLS RINGING]

Think that's heavy-handed?

So you see how what's happening here is a kind of visit through the town? It isn't until later in the film that you realize that every space you go by should have registered with you, because the later action of the film will take place on these streets, in these barns, on these balconies.

[INAUDIBLE]

Now, watch this shot. And there's Gary Cooper, who will be our hero. And in fact, he's marrying Grace Kelly, who in this film is a Quaker. And guess what one of the climactic events in the film is? The Quaker lady fires a gun to save her beloved, violates her moral principles and kills someone to save her man.

OK.

[END PLAYBACK]

Now, I don't want you to think that I'm suggesting that *High Noon* is not a remarkable movie. It is. It's one of the very, very good Westerns. It has great subtlety and power in its own way. But I think that Altman definitely wanted us to think about the radical differences, between the universe imagined in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and the world as it's imagined in even subtle, adult '50s Westerns.

So many of these things are crystallized for us in the remarkable conclusion of the film. And I hope that you'll pay a lot of attention to that. It's an extended sequence. And it operates according to a principle of parallel action. The church I mentioned earlier catches fire. Watch why it catches fire. It's connected to the plot.

And while the church is burning, most of the town gets together in a kind of comic bucket brigade to put the fire out. They are partly aided by a new fire engine, a mark of the town's growth that arrives at a certain point in the history of the town. The fire engine, I believe, arrives at the same time that Mrs. Miller arrives in town. They're both equally important historical events for the town's future.

But the arrival of the engine suggests the coming of civilization. And there's a certain sense in which the fighting of the fire, it's actually almost treated like a slapstick event. Real film buffs would actually recognize visual allusions or references to the Keystone Kops era.

I don't want to exaggerate this, but you'll see it. I mean, there actually is someone carrying a bucket that has a hole in it, water's falling, that kind of thing. And they're incredibly ineffectual in their trying to put out the fire. I don't think they succeed very well. The church essentially is destroyed, or at least the steeple is destroyed.

But what happens nonetheless is the town has come together. And it's actually a moment in which you actually feel that the town's identity is being forged as these disparate people-- the whores and the barbers and the respectable people and the saloon keeper all get together to try to put the fire out. So it is a moment in which the town is really aborning.

While that is happening, McCabe is being stalked by the assassins. The creator of the town, the founder of the town, is in a fight for his life while this slapstick fire fighting is going on. Watch how that works itself out. And then pay special attention to the profound, disturbing ambiguities of the ending.

One of the reasons I admire *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* so much is that it seems in many ways to satisfy the desire one has for the trappings of a conventional Western. All of the elements that you think should belong to a serious Western are present.

But they're present in such ironized, such damaged, such inverted form, that they make you rethink not only those particular conventions, but the larger mythological and ideological work that the Western mythology has performed in American society up to this time. So it makes *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* not just a wonderfully entertaining film. It's full of comic moments and brilliant performances. It is in its own right a great work of imaginative intelligence.

But it is an even larger thing, it seems to me, because of the intelligence with which it engages in this systematic conversation with its aesthetic and moral ancestry in the great founding story of the Western, which I suppose must be identified as America's most distinctive and in some ways most disturbingly revealing story about itself.