

Lecture 16 - Altman

I. Robert Altman (1925-2006)

- Career
- Defining qualities:
 - Moral skepticism
 - Sympathy for the marginal
 - Plot vs. character
 - Fiction vs. "reality"

II. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971)

- "Ruin the sacred truths"
- Sound and image: a new realism?
- Hero/savior - clown or fool
- Love story: gal from the East
- Founding myth: Presbyterian Church
- The ending: slapstick murder as the town is born

Disclaimer: *The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.*

- Dissenting genre
 - *The Searchers* is not quite a dissenting genre – rather, it's one of the most subtle and complicated examples of a classic western
 - John Wayne is deeply flawed, but he's still a hero
 - Positions are not entirely repudiated and reversed
 - Dissenting genre goes much further
- *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971)
 - What happens to American movies in the 1970s involves a systematic commitment to reverse or undermine all of the commitments to which any given genre belongs
 - To borrow from Harold Bloom, "ruin the sacred truths" – this is what happens to film in this era
 - *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* is in conversation with the whole history of the Western, going all the way back to the silent era.
 - The arrival of the fire engine – it's a symbol of the fact that the town has become respectable enough to have institutions like a fire company
 - Of course, the use of the fire engine is a comically inept scene – it evokes the era of slapstick comedy
 - *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* asks its viewers to think especially about two older Westerns:
 - *High Noon*
 - Clip: the opening sequence of *High Noon*

- Note that it begins with a ballad, like many Westerns
- Note that the bad guys are marked by their dark appearance, their uncleanness, and their evil expressions
- The hero has to fight them alone – what allows him to survive is in part his greater knowledge of the physical geography of the town
 - This same pattern is clearly present at the end of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*
- Note that our introduction to the town comes via church bells and the appearance of the church
- My Darling Clementine
 - The central energies of this film are very close to those of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* – except that they’re the obverse of each other
 - The classic Western is always about the creation of a civilized community out of a savage and chaotic wilderness
 - The looming rock formations of John Ford’s setting suggests the smallness of human endeavors
 - The hero kills with impunity, but he’s nervous around women
 - Notice the flags – there’s always an implicit patriotism in classic Westerns
- All of this is reenacted in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, but exposed to a terrible irony and skepticism
- It’s a color film, but it doesn’t have much color
- There’s the sense that the weather really matters, as the snow piles up higher and higher in the snow storm, it’s important, and related to the terrible killing sequence
- Altman calls our attention to ambient sound
- The classic hero or savior figure is a kind of silly clown or fool – he’s terribly easy to manipulate
- The heroine has come from England to be a madam, a manager of whores
 - She’s much more intelligent than McCabe, but because she’s a woman there are limits to what she can do
 - This is a sort of commentary
- The town grows on the periphery of the film – even though it’s always going on, you’re not aware of it
- The barber is black – in St. Louis he couldn’t work as a barber, but in this brand new town, everyone still has a chance, because there aren’t enough people
 - In this way the town is made up of outcasts, who are limited in larger society because of prejudice or because of some other disability
- Altman likes shocking shootings, with bodies bleeding in the water
 - For literate readers of the Western, this has an absolute shock value, because it so completely reverses all their expectations

- In the classic Western, there is apocalyptic violence, after which society is regenerated
- In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, you see this violence with McCabe trying to save his own life, inter-cut with the slapstick scene of people trying to put out the church fire
- Every element of the classic Western is mocked and turned upside down in this manner in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*