Robert Altman's Feminism: The Treatment of Women in His 1970s Films *& 3 Women* (1977)

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INTRODUCTION

Upon studying the films from the New Hollywood era with the determination to find something remotely feminist, I was pleasantly surprised when I discovered Robert Altman's films. There is a refreshing presentation of women that depicts them in a much more positive and multifaceted light. Having observed dozens of relationships between the men and women in his 1970s films, as well as the treatment of his characters, I find that Altman's films promote a form of feminism rarely depicted in the New Hollywood era, which I term as, "Altman's Feminism."

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines feminism as, "the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities." There is nothing in this definition to suggest that to be a feminist one must be female. Therefore to object to a feminist label for Altman because he is a male director is sexist in itself. "Altman's Feminism" resides in his perception of women's treatment and role in society, especially during this crucial period of social turmoil. "Altman's Feminism" centers this goal by focusing on the wrongs he sees women endure in society, thus foregrounding the lack of equal rights and opportunities, while also treating the women with a much more humanist approach than his contemporaries.[1]

It is crucial to understand that "Altman's Feminism" does not necessarily equate with the Second-Wave feminism movement's goals. Their goals stressed the importance of a woman's choices in society, such as reproductive freedom and equal opportunity in society. Instead I find that many of Altman's films aim to examine and critique the flaws of patriarchal society

[1] This is not to say that *all* women in Altman's films are treated with respect. For example, in *Nashville* Altman seems to be critical of "BBC" reporter Opal (Geraldine Chaplin). Generally though, I would argue, that Altman is much more sympathetic and respectful of his female characters than males characters.

regarding its treatment of women, rather than posing solutions to the problem. However Altman's approach reminds the audience that women are also a part of society and experience its effects, as well. Before examining Altman's feminist qualities, it is important to establish the general treatment of women during the New Hollywood period.

WOMEN IN THE NEW HOLLYWOOD ERA

The New Hollywood era is generally regarded as a revisionist period of American cinema, one that Jonathan Kirshner, in his book on politics and society in the New Hollywood era, argues "insisted on [characters'] imperfection: women and men, flawed, anxious, despairing, and often, losing."[2] Yet, when one compares the two genders, women were hardly given the same degree of understanding, respect, or screen time in these New Hollywood films. Rather the films seem more interested in exploring and challenging society's expectations of masculinity.[3] Actress Julie Christie recounts that, despite its bustling and ecstatic energy, the New Hollywood period was "not a great time for women."[4] In her book *From Reverence to Rape*, Haskell concurs with Christie, citing that the early New Hollywood period, and arguably the latter half of the era as well, was "the most disheartening [for women] in screen history."[5]

A conditioned look at the most successful and canonical films of the period, such as *Easy Rider* (1969), *The Godfather* (1972), and *Taxi Driver* (1976), reveals that very few portray

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[2] Jonathan Kirshner, *Hollywood's Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film in America*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012.) 87.
[3] Some films that center on masculinity include *Deliverance* (1972), *The Godfather II* (1974), *Easy Rider* (1969), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *The Graduate* (1967), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *American Graffiti* (1973), *Mean Streets* (1973), and *The Conversation* (1974).
[4] *A Decade Under the Influence,* second episode.
[5] Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987) 232; Haskell wrote this observation in 1971, but it extends arguably to the rest of the New Hollywood era with films like *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977) and *Saturday Night Fever* (1977).

women in a positive or even neutral light. Kirshner acknowledges Haskell's observation that the "sexual liberation [of the 1970s] has done little more than re-imprison women in sexual roles, but at a lower and more debased level." However in opposition, Kirshner argues that "By evaluating women's roles in isolation from the ideology of seventies films, critics like Haskell lose this larger (and critical) perspective."[6] I both agree and disagree with Kirshner's argument. While it is important to analyze both male and female's representations in terms of the 1970s ideology, I also believe that it is crucial to acknowledge that there is very little change in women's representation in 1970s in comparison to those from the 1960s, 1950s, or even 1940s. In other words, even if the men in the New Hollywood films are anti-heroes, they are still the heroes of the story. In contrast, women in these films are often "debased" and regarded as either the protagonist's enemy or as an object for sexual pleasure. Two canonical films that I believe best exemplify these two tendencies of gender relations are *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), respectively.

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher) is the main source of conflict for protagonist Randle MacMurphy (Jack Nicholson). Nurse Ratched is initially presented as neat, organized, and collected. However, as the film progresses, MacMurphy starts to see beyond the Nurse's seemingly considerate façade. "She ain't honest," MacMurphy tells the head psychiatrist after a few weeks of his stay at the mental institution. After a few failed attempts at democratic voting for changes in the floor's daily schedule, MacMurphy becomes aware of Nurse Ratched's dictatorship. Instead of nurturing and cultivating the patients, MacMurphy sees her as stripping the patients' little self-confidence and independence to the bare bone. Nurse Ratched's flawed system and illogic for the mentally handicapped ultimately leads

[6] Kirshner 84, 87.

to the death of one of the patients. When Nurse Ratched tries to smooth over the patient's death, MacMurphy loses his control and attempts to strangle her to death. This action ultimately leads to the lobotomy that ends MacMurphy's life. Overall, *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* seems to suggest that woman's strict, flawed, and constricted system kills the free-spirited man.

In *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), women are presented as sexual objects to be abused and used for men's purpose. The only screen time women receive is when Alex (Malcolm McDowell), the film's protagonist, rapes them or when he is speaking to them from a subordinate position, specifically the Nurse and his mother. When an independent and secure woman, such as the cat woman, attempts to assert herself and demand authority, she is punished by the means of a violent, brutal death. Halfway through the film, Alex is adopted by the audience through the utilization of POV shots and wide-angle lens that elicit sympathy from the viewer. This view carries through until the end of the film when the government official tells Alex that he can have whatever he wants. As seen by the film's final shot of Alex fantasizing about having intercourse with a woman, it is clear that Alex still intends to lead his life of raping women and causing choas. To identify with Alex means to see women as objects to rape rather than as subjects of being.

Despite the ruthless violence against and usage of women in the greater part of the era, there is a small light at the end of the tunnel. During the mid-1970s there were a "trickle of feminist-inspired movies"[7] that centered on female protagonists with the woman in the title role. These films explored a woman's life in the 1970s, her emerging independence, and her reactions and relations to the men and world around her. Two films that fall under this category include

[7] Haskell 375.

one that Haskell explicitly mentions, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1975), and one I believe is heavily (and positively) influenced by the women's liberation movement: *Annie Hall* (1977).[8]

Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore begins with Alice (Ellen Burstyn) as the dutiful housewife and mother to her bratty son, Tommy (Alfred Lutter), an opening that could be used for a Warner Bros. or Universal musical or melodrama. Early in the film Alice's husband is killed in a car accident, leaving Alice and Tommy with no source of income. Instead of the typical, domestic home tale it initially seemed to be, the film soon becomes a document of Alice and Tommy's journey to Monterey, CA so Alice can fulfill her dream of becoming a singer. Alice is not a one-sided, placid woman; she is a complex character that can curse, yell at her kid, and sleep with men, all the while showing care and affection for her son and friends. Most importantly, Alice is not punished at the end of the film. Unlike the precursor women's films, ones that centered on domestic struggles and concluded with the woman suffering, the title, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, suggests that Alice no longer lives in these old conventions. Instead she assumes a new film role, one where she is in control of what happens in her life. Whatever mistakes or successes occur, she is in control of them. "But it's my life, you know, *my* life. It's not some man's life that I'm gonna help him out with," Alice tells her best friend. Alice no longer lives in a world of simple, one-sided film conventions, but rather one filled with the freedom and complexities of real life.

Annie Hall is perhaps one of the films most aware of the women's liberation movement without ever explicitly mentioning it. *Annie Hall* is Alvy Singer's (Woody Allen) examination of his relationship with Annie Hall (Diane Keaton) to figure out "where the screw-up came in" that

[8] While *Annie Hall* breaks with the outlined criteria of these films, as an unreliable male character narrates through the film, it is arguable that Annie is also the protagonist of the film as it is about her progression towards becoming an independent woman.

ended their relationship. For the astute viewer, the "screw-up" is Annie's progression towards becoming a mindful and independent woman. Throughout their relationship, Annie realizes that Alvy is hindering her personal growth and that, in order to continue growing, she needs to move on from her relationship with Alvy. The film's non-linear structure, as well as her distinct change in clothing style, crystalizes the sharp contrasts between Annie's character in the beginning and the end of their relationship. By the end of the film, Annie is no longer the "fluttery and unsure"[9] girl Alvy first met, but rather an articulate and independent woman. The film ends with a loving respect and fond memories between Alvy and Annie despite their parting ways forever.

Both *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* and *Annie Hall* break some of the constraints that were placed on women in the 1970s films. However both *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *A Clockwork Orange* put women back in a negative representation. Indeed, as Haskell notes, the 1970s were an ambivalent period for the representation of women.[10] In order to look for a feministic outlet in these New Hollywood films, it is best to examine not only the relations between men and women in the films, but also the director's treatment of women. As aforementioned, I argue that Robert Altman is the best consistent outlet for a feminist studying the films of the New Hollywood mavericks. Before examining the qualities and providing examples that make him feminist, it is crucial to address the 1970s film that is difficult to label as "Altman Feminist."

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[9] Pauline Kael, *For Keeps: 30 Years at the Movies*. (New York: Penguin Group, 1996.) 867.
[10] Haskell titles her chapter on the 1970s and 1980s as "The Age of Ambivalence," which states that there is no clear or steady representation of women during those years.

THE EXCEPTION TO THE TERM: *M*A*S*H* (1970)

The one 1970s Altman film that is difficult to read as "Altman Feminist" is *M*A*S*H* (1970). A satire of the reverent American war film, *M*A*S*H* thrives on its running gag of tormenting and objectifying women, which ultimately strips them of their dignity, specifically Major Margaret "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan (Sally Kellerman). Both protagonists Captain Hawkeye Pierce (Donald Sutherland) and Captain Trapper John McIntyre (Elliot Gould) are initially attracted to Major O'Houlihan due to her physical features, but are quickly repelled by her strict adherence to army policy; she is what Trapper John calls, "a regular army clown." Her unwillingness to participate in the men's mockery of the army and war makes her an easy target for what is essentially sexual harassment.

When the audience first meets Major O'Houlihan, she is presented as intelligent, friendly and assertive. Her appearance is clean, organized and put-together as she wears her hair in a tight bun and her uniform is well fitted to her body. She is not presented as an evil threat, but rather as a woman dedicated to the well being of the M*A*S*H unit. Her confidence makes her seem like the perfect corrective to Hawkeye and Trapper John's inappropriate behavior. However the army fails to listen to Major O'Houlihan's complaints and does not reprimand the two men. "This isn't a hospital! It's an insane asylum!" Major O'Houlihan screams. Major O'Houlihan's comment seems to ring true as, by the time of the football game, Major O'Houlihan is presented as a dumb blonde incapable of processing information about the game. The agency and independence she clearly possessed at the beginning of the film is gone as a direct result of the army's failure to address the episodes of sexual harassment.

There are two major events that are central to the film's plot that constitute the objectification and sexual harassment of Major O'Houlihan. The first event occurs the night Lt. Colonel Henry Blake (Roger Bowen) leaves to meet with General Hammond (G. Wood). With no supervision from a higher authority, Hawkeye and Trapper John celebrate with a night of drinking and partying throughout the MASH unit. Trapper John commands the unit to "bring [him] some sex," then points to Major O'Houlihan. "That one. The sultry bitch with the fire in her eyes. Take her clothes off." This derogatory comment metaphorically strips Major O'Houlihan of her dignity as Trapper John refers to her only as a sexual object. This form of harassment is taken to another level when Trapper John and Hawkeye broadcast Major O'Houlihan and Major Burns's (Robert Duvall) attempt to make love for all the camp to hear. Major O'Houlihan tells Major Burns to "kiss [her] hot lips." The next morning Hawkeye and Trapper John have a field day teasing Major O'Houlihan about the incident in high, feminine voices. Flustered and embarrassed, Major O'Houlihan runs out of the mess hall crying. Hawkeye replies that it must be "one of those ladies' things." From this point on, everyone in the camp refers to Major O'Houlihan as "Hot Lips." Not only does this episode result in the stripping of her dignity, but also it leads to very few people in the M*A*S*H unit respecting Major O'Houlihan.

The second sexual harassment event and continual stripping of Major O'Houlihan's dignity occurs when the men bet if Major O'Houlihan is a real blonde. The men decide that only way they can all see if Major O'Houlihan is blonde is if they strip the tent covering while she in the shower. The M*A*S*H unit sets up shop in front of the shower tent like they are about to watch a show. When the tent walls lift up, Major O'Houlihan drops to the floor so quickly that the viewer does not get a full view of her naked body. What the viewer plainly sees instead is the

rest of the unit sitting across from her, clapping and whistling in approval of the "show." In addition to mentally stripping Major O'Houlihan of her dignity, this scene depicts the men *physically* stripping her to her most vulnerable state. As the audience-spectator set up reveals, the men's antics blatantly use Major O'Houlihan as not only as an object to gaze upon, but also as an object to cure them from their boredom.

While I will be heavily discussing Laura Mulvey in my later portion of my essay, it is nonetheless beneficial to include Mulvey in this depiction of stripping Major O'Houlihan's dignity. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Mulvey observes that in film "woman stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning."[11] This view seems particularly relevant to Major O'Houlihan's situation as, despite her attempts to be the "maker of meaning" in the M*A*S*H unit, she is consistently shut down, ignored, ridiculed and eventual forced into "the silent image of woman." For a woman who was introduced with independence and respect, the incident foreshadows the eventual downfall of Major O'Houlihan's strong character to the immature men of the M*A*S*H unit.

After the shower incident Major O'Houlihan runs to Colonel Blake's office to demand the arrest of the instigators. The next cut shows Colonel Blake in bed with one of the unit's nurses. His cool, relaxed demeanor shows no concern for Major O'Houlihan's relentless cries and pleads. Instead Colonel Blake's personality matches that of Hawkeye and Trapper John. Indifferent to the her threats, he tells Major O'Houlihan, "Okay, resign your goddamn commission," leaving Major O'Houlihan in a state of shock and repeating, "My commission." In

[11] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Narrative and Pleasure Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 712.

review of the scene, scholar Helene Keyssar views the shower scene as "a terribly vulnerable human being under assault, not a sex object."[12] While this reading of the shower scene is plausible, it is difficult to completely accept such an interpretation as the confrontation with Colonel Blake occurs right after. The juxtaposition of the scenes and likening Colonel Blake with Trapper John and Hawkeye ultimately makes Major O'Houlihan the butt of the joke.

General Hammond, a man of high military rank and authority, would seem to be the man to discipline Hawkeye and Trapper John's inappropriate behavior. He calls Colonel Blake in regard to Major O'Houlihan's letter of compliant and tells him, "[Major O'Houlihan] makes some accusations, Henry, I find pretty hard to believe." His call seems serious and shows his concern for the well being of the M*A*S*H unit. When Blake casually tells him not to believe her accusations, Hammond decides to check out the camp for himself. During the discussion between Blake, Trapper John, Hawkeye, and General Hammond, Trapper John tells General Hammond it is not their fault if Major O'Houlihan does not like her nickname. At this point the spectator would expect General Hammond to discipline Trapper John, but instead the moment Trapper John mentions that she will not allow the unit to play football, General Hammond quickly switches the topic of discussion from Major O'Houlihan's complaints to organizing a football game between his and the M*A*S*H units. At the conclusion of the conversation, there is nothing to distinguish the higher authorities from Hawkeye and Trapper John; they are all men who are concerned with keeping themselves entertained during the war.

By the "climax" of the film, the football game, Major O'Houlihan is portrayed as a dumb blonde who cannot comprehend the rules of the sport. By this time, everyone in the camp calls her by her derogatory nickname, "Hot Lips," without any complaint from Major O'Houlihan.

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[12] Helene Keyssar, *Robert Altman's America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.) 76.

The assertive and professional nurse depicted at the beginning of the film is no longer present. Instead of resigning her commission, Major O'Houlihan stays and is appointed as the captain of the cheerleading squad for the (male) M*A*S*H unit football team. As head cheerleader Major O'Houlihan is portrayed as the cheerleader stereotype who acts dumb and sports high, curly pigtails tied with pink ribbon. Her role is to cheer the men's success on the field, thus making her man's supporter, not a "maker of meaning."[13] The film closes with the (male) victory of winning the football game without ever addressing Major O'Houlihan's complaints.

In tracing the changes in Major O'Houlihan's character, it is possible to argue that Altman is commenting on the sexism that occurs within the army. Yet this reading is quite ambiguous as one of the army's highest authority fails to reprimand the two men and the film immediately establishes identification with Hawkeye and Trapper John, men who find the war absurd. To successfully critique the sexism that occurs in the army, the viewer would expect those in higher authority, such as General Hammond, to punish Trapper John and Hawkeye. Instead, General Hammond is likened to Trapper John and Hawkeye at the end of the film. In addition the viewer should be distanced from Trapper John and Hawkeye by seeing them as absurd and crazy people. Instead the viewer is attracted to them *because* of their very nature and laughs along with the men's antics; the viewer ultimately sees the war as the absurd, not the men. Regardless of the Altman's intent, the women in *M*A*S*H*, particularly Major O'Houlihan, are repeatedly stripped of their dignity and are objectified and mocked by the men in the film, making it a misogynist film.[14]

Despite the film's misogynist content, there are a plethora of Altman's films that are not misogynistic. Rather most of his films do contain an "Altman Feminist" quality. Having

[13] Mulvey 712.
[14] David Thompson, ed. *Altman on Altman*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006.) 47.

explored the lack of feminist qualities in *M*A*S*H*, I will now explore and outline what qualities make the rest of Altman's 1970s filmography feminist.

ROBERT ALTMAN AND HIS FEMINIST FILMS

Of the New Hollywood directors, Robert Altman is arguably the most feminist in terms of his representations of women's agency and of gender equality. Since the beginning of his directorial career, starting with *That Cold Day in the Park* (1969), Altman has displayed a genuine and respectful regard for the American female. Altman accords women this respect by characterizing the women as active subjects who participate and further the narrative, rather than posing as an obstacle to the plot for the male protagonist to conquer. This type of feminist film expands throughout Altman's filmography, though it is particularly important in the ones filmed during the New Hollywood era, a time when macho-violent male films were being made simultaneously to the Second-Wave Feminism movement.

Even in Altman's male-centered films, such as *California Split* (1974) and *Thieves Like Us* (1974), women are not only visualized, but also they are treated as equals who coexist with men. In *California Split,* a small buddy film about two compulsive gamblers, Altman includes a "small but precise space"[15] for two women who work as prostitutes. Susan Peters (Gwen Welles) and Barbara Miller's (Ann Prentiss) relevance to the plot is minor enough that their characters could easily be ignored and characterized by stereotypes and scenes of them on the job. However, instead of labeling them with misogynistic attributes, Altman chooses to portray them

[15] Keyssar 128.

in a positive light with "equal status and equal strength"[16] by showing them in the comforts of their home and maintaining a co-equal relationship with Charlie Waters (Elliot Gould) and Bill Denny (George Segal), the film's main characters.

From the moment he introduces them, Altman establishes the girls' quirks and personalities. The two girls get to be as funny and dynamic as Charlie and Bill, and the viewer cannot help but find the girls as equally charming. At one point Barbara interrupts Denny's slumber on the living room couch, not to woo him, but rather to grab the TV guide. Early in the film Susan comes home from one of her escort dates and starts crying because she really liked him. When Charlie goes to console Susan, the conversation renders almost like a brother trying to cheer up his sister. Keyssar best sums up the indescribable relationship between both the men and women, but it works to support my example of Susan and Charlie's talk. "There is no word that accurately names the relationship between the two women and the two men. It lacks the mutual knowledge of the other that distinguishes friendship and love from other relationships, yet some of its attributes make it difficult to distinguish from love."[17] Whatever the appropriate term for their relationship, it is clear that they all care about one another. Later that night, to feed her sorrows, Susan comes out of her room in her pink onesie pajamas and reaches for her favorite cereal that is stored on top of the armoire. This brief but comedic moment of heartbreak could easily be mistaken for the breakup of a steady, romantic relationship. In essence, the fact that Susan and Barbara are call girls does not interest Altman. Rather, Altman's interest lies in the girls' personalities and their comradely relationship with Charlie and Bill.

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[16] Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.) 374.
[17] Keyssar 129.

The two women in *California Split* only suggested what was to come in Altman's representation of women in his future films. By giving them personalities, Altman allows the women agency through some aspect that sets them apart from the woman as object. The protagonists in *3 Women* (1977) and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971) are women who do not fit the mold of the cinematic ideal woman, removing them from the trap of what Mulvey calls "the male gaze."[18] In *3 Women,* both Millie (Shelley Duvall) and Pinky (Sissy Spacek) have odd and unique quirks about their physiognomy that "disrupts the anticipated uses and gratifications afforded by the prototypes of beautiful bodies in popular culture."[19] For example, Shelley Duvall's teeth are rather large and slightly crooked, her face narrow and thin, and, while it is the marketed ideal, her skinny body seems more gangly than sensuous. For Sissy Spacek her numerous freckles and strawberry-blonde, long hair cast her as an innocent young girl rather than a sexually mature female adult ready to be cast as a male lead's lover. By casting actresses who possess such unconventional physical attributes, the viewer is not able to objectify them for their beauty. Altman does not want the viewer to objectify the women because they *are* the narrative.

In addition to their atypical looks, the women's personalities and intellect divorce them from objectification. Mrs. Miller (Julie Christie) in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* is another Altman character whose agency is defined not only by her unconventional looks, but also her personality and intellect. Mrs. Miller defies almost every classical Western female convention. Unlike her predecessors, Mrs. Miller is a forthright woman who speaks with a heavy Irish accent, possesses unruly curly hair, smokes cigarettes and opium, has a heavy appetite, and works as the Madame for Presbyterian Church's brothel. Perhaps Mrs. Miller's most uncharacteristic feature is her

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[18] Mulvey 715.
[19] Robert T. Self, *Robert Altman's Subliminal Realtiy*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.) 50.

intellect.[20] Mrs. Miller has the brains to profitably operate the brothel whereas the bumbling John McCabe (Warren Beatty) can hardly keep a book. Another uncharacteristic marker of the film, indicative of the film's title,[21] is the absence of a romance between McCabe and Mrs. Miller. While McCabe's affections for Mrs. Miller are quite clear, Mrs. Miller, who arguably possesses some mutual care for him, does not allow romance to distract her from her goal of escaping prostitution. Mrs. Miller "does not wish to provide the expected romantic, domesticating role,"[22] but rather prefers to put her individual needs before any man's romantic desires.

Robert Self notes that *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*'s inclusion and specific of Mrs. Miller "joins in the historical research that has 'found a new western woman; through her eyes we see a new view of the West.'"[23] This reading is further supported by Altman's decision to add "*& Mrs. Miller*" to the film's title, for the film is not only McCabe's (man's) story, but also Mrs. Miller's (woman's) story in the Old West. Mrs. Miller's experience in and perspective of Presbyterian Church is just as important as McCabe's. Coinciding with this revision of the new female perspective is *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*'s undoing of the female as an object of threat to man. Instead of posing as a threat to the business, Mrs. Miller serves as an opportunity for monetary success for McCabe. Instead it is McCabe who is as an object of threat to Mrs. Miller, a threat that ultimately succeeds in ruining her chance to escape prostitution and travel to San Francisco to run a "respectable boardin' house." Keyssar concludes that throughout the film Altman does not "demean" Mrs. Miller and that the audience has:

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[20] While there have been strong and intelligent Western heroines in the past, like Vieanna (Joan Crawford) in *Johnny Guitar* (1954) and Vance Jeffords (Barbara Stanwyck) in *The Furies* (1950), the women in those films typically don masculine clothes as a sign of their strength and, in some respects, as less threatening. In contrast, Mrs. Miller is not only strong and intelligent, but also retains her femininity.
[21] Keyssar 178.
[22] Kolker 355.
[23] Robert T. Self. *Robert Altman's McCabe & Mrs. Miller: Reframing the American West*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007.) 34.

> every reason to respect [her] at the end of the film: she has treated well the women she employs, she has made a successful enterprise out of a disorganized business, and she has given McCabe what she could, including warnings against his self destructive romanticism. And she refused to be a martyr to a hopeless cause in which she had no way of intervening.[24]

Through the character of Mrs. Miller, with her unconventional appearance and intellect, the visibility and agency of women in society is clearly important to Altman.

In *Nashville* (1975) Altman transitions from merely depicting historical women as individuals with agency to contemporary women confronting the gender conflict and patriarchy of the 1970s. There is an overarching discord between the men and women in *Nashville* that illustrates women's desire to escape from the clutch of patriarchy's controlling hand. This conflict is seen most explicitly through the famed country singers Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson) and Barbara Jean (Ronnie Blakely). It has been noted that Haven Hamilton functions as the patriarch of country music, with parallels to real life singers like Roy Acuff or Hank Snow.[25] Similarly Ronnie Blakely has stated that she based her character Barbara Jean on the famous country singers Loretta Lynn and Dolly Parton.[26] Applying these allusions to Hamilton and Jean title them as the King and Queen of country music. However, instead of a happy coexistence, these titles indicate a source of conflict and struggle that is evident between their interactions with one another, their interactions with other characters, and the film's very questioning and critiquing of patriarchal control.

Patriarchal control is a core element that influences every character's behavior and actions, but none more so than Haven Hamilton. Hamilton's inner feelings reveal the anxiety of a

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[24] Keyssar 198.
[25] Jan Stuart, *The Nashville Chronicle: The Making of Robert Altman's Masterpiece*. (New York: Limelight Editions, 2003). 120.; While the character Haven Hamilton was based on the previously mentioned men, Gibson stated that he studied other contemporary famous figures for his role, mainly Henry Kissinger (for power) and Bob Hope (for longevity).
[26] Stuart 120.

man losing control over and to women. Altman typically blasts Hamilton's phony, happy façade and exposes Hamilton's anxiety when he is with a crowd of people, especially when there are women present. Three women in particular that shake Hamilton's confidence are the "BBC reporter" Opal (Geraldine Chaplin), his mistress Lady Pearl (Barbara Baxley), and Barbara Jean rival Connie White (Karen Black).

The first example occurs within the first few minutes of the film when Hamilton sees Opal walk into the recording studio with her tape recorder to interview Hamilton. Hamilton throws her out before she gets the chance to speak because "there are no visitors allowed in the recording studio."[27] Opal functions as the ultimate source of discomfort for Hamilton; she is not only an independent woman, but also is British, the enemy of the war that established America's independence.[28] Later that day, when the city of Nashville gathers to welcome Barbara Jean, Altman shows Hamilton and Lady Pearl (Barbara Baxley) speaking with some of Hamilton's admirers. As Lady Pearl talks about the girl baton band performing for Jean's arrival, Hamilton, with a tense and stern voice but a smile on his face, says, "Pearl, shut up." This comment is so subtle that it may take a few additional viewings to catch, but it is enough to communicate Hamilton's anxiety, not only because Pearl is taking the spotlight, but also she keeps talking about the work the girl's band put in for the event.

After the show at the Opry, the country royalty go out for a night on the town to the bar King of the Road. During the bar's band's intermission, they announce there is a star in the room that they want to come up and sing for everyone. Altman frames Hamilton in the periphery while

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[27] It is further clear that Hamilton feels threatened by Opal specifically because there is a family of tourists decked with cameras and recorders in the recording studio.

[28] Richard R. Ness, ""Doing Some Replacin'": Gender, Genre, and the Subverison of Dominant Ideology in the Music Scores." *Robert Altman: Critical Essays*. Ed. Rick Armstrong. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2011.) 48.

Connie White (Karen Black) is placed in the center. Naturally Hamilton believes the band is talking about him and starts to slowly rise from his chair. When they announce Connie White, Hamilton stops rising and looks shocked. Quickly he retreats into his phony Hamilton façade, sits down and claps happily for White. These three incidents alone, though subtle, show Hamilton's discomfort with the independent and self-thinking female, as he views the women as encroaching on his space and his sense of self-importance.

While the aforementioned incidents occur in crowds, Hamilton's anxiety and fear is also seen through the camera's close-ups and cutaways when he performs his songs. When Altman is not framing Hamilton to emphasize his short stature (another ironic way of subverting Hamilton's authority), Altman zooms in on Hamilton's face to disclose his tension and anxiety. Altman scholar Robert Self has noted that Altman's art cinema utilizes "the use of zoom lens in shots that begin at a medium distance and then zoom in slowly to gaze close-up in desire and separation at a character's face."[29] This statement is also applicable to this ensemble-cast film, though its usage varies per person. For Haven Hamilton Altman uses the zoom to "continu[e] [the] critique of patriarchal authority,"[30] a theme commonplace throughout his films. Hamilton always demands respect and attention but rarely ever receives it from either the characters, Altman, or the viewer.

Hamilton's first close-up occurs in the recording studio when he sings "200 Years." Altman thwarts Hamilton's desire for control by meandering the camera around the recording studio before eventually settling on Hamilton. The medium shot functions on two levels as the shot frames Hamilton in equal composition with the backup singers, while also revealing the true persona underneath Hamilton's insincere façade. Altman zooms in on Hamilton's face, revealing

[29] Self 109.
[30] Self 110.

the insecurity and the "hypocrisy and insensitivity"[31] that is to be commonplace throughout the rest of Hamilton's performances. This close-up reveals Hamilton glancing up and quickly surveying his audience in the recording studio. There is nothing relaxed or at ease about Hamilton. Instead this opening communicates his overall persona, which is that he is about as fake as the strikingly obvious toupee on his head.

In addition to the close-ups, Altman undermines Hamilton's patriarchal authority during his performances by cutting to other places or people of more interest.[32] One performance that best depicts this subversion is at the Grand Ole Opry. Altman cuts from Hamilton's performance six times to observe what is happening backstage. Significantly all of these cuts involve women in some way or another. As Hamilton sings the viewer sees Winifred (Barbara Harris) trying to get into the Opry, Connie White getting ready to go on stage, and Pearl on stage swaying to Hamilton's song.[33] In addition to the cutaways, the various long shots that center Hamilton's body (at least fifteen) all further emphasize Hamilton's short stature, symbolizing his ineptness as a patriarchal figure and diminishing his authority.

In opposition Barbara Jean's battle differs from Haven Hamilton's, as Jean endures oppression by men and is never in control of her decisions. Similar to how Hamilton's encounters with women depict his anxiety, Jean's encounters with men show her oppression by patriarchy and its disastrous effects. Jean faces oppression from the various men that she interacts with, such as political campaign organizer John Triplette (Michael Murphy) and lawyer Delbert Reese (Ned Beatty). However the oppression manifests most directly through her relationship with her husband-and-business manager, Barnett (Alan Garfield).

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[31] Gerald Plecki. *Robert Altman*. (Boston: Twanye Publishers, 1985.) 83.
[32] Ness 48; the focus of Ness' essay is on the collective male's songs being subverted; my interest lies in contrasting Jean and Hamilton's performances because of their titles, opposing genders, and opposite attitudes.
[33] Ness 48.

Jean and Barnett are seen alone together for the first time about an hour into the film. As they listen to the Grand Ole Opry on the radio in her hospital room, Jean sits on her bed and paints her nails, while Barnett sits in the chair next to the radio, eating his Kentucky Fried Chicken. There is nothing in the shot's composition to suggest that the two are happily married. In fact, this scene shows that Barnett is not only Jean's business manager, but also the controller of her life. This is explicitly stated when Barnett tells Jean, "Don't tell me how to run your life. I've been doing pretty good with it." The quality of Barnet's management that he seems so sure of is questionable given that Jean has had a few mental breakdowns in the past and recently collapsed at the Nashville airport. The moment Jean asserts herself and states what she wants, Barnett's condescending statements shut her down.

In contrast to Hamilton, the center framing, close-ups and a lack of distracting cuts during Jean's performances suggest Altman sympathizes with Jean and allows her an outlet from the oppression. For Jean the close-ups are utilized as a means of understanding. Jean is placed at the front and in the center of the frame, especially during her performance at the Opry Belle. As she sings, Altman slowly zooms in from a medium shot to a close-up. This and the similarly following close-ups not only reveal Jean's peace, but also direct the spectator's focus to the lyrics and Jean's relationship with them. There is no "act" for Jean as there is for Hamilton. Her lyrics are serious whereas Hamilton's are a farce. Unlike the nervous Hamilton, Jean looks relaxed and content in front of the audience. The lyrics from the song, "Dues," briefly free her from her husband's constraint by singing about her tribulations: "It's that careless disrespect, I can't take no more baby / It's the way you that don't love me, when you say you do, baby / It hurts so bad, it gets me down, down, down / I wanna walk away from this battleground /This hurtin' life, it ain't no good / I'd give a lot to love you the way I used to do. Wish I could…" By

privileging Jean with close-ups during her performance, Altman brings attention to the wrongful treatment of women in American society.

Barbara Jean's performance at the Opry Belle is treated with reverence as Altman refrains from making distracting cuts from Jean as she sings. Cutaways to the audience looking enraptured with her performance, including Kenny (David Hayward), Opal, and Pfc. Glenn Kelly (Scott Glenn), sometimes disrupt these close-ups. However none of the cuts depict any conversations backstage, rather the cuts show each person's interest in the performance. These cuts also function to foreshadow a connection between Jean, Barnett, and Kenny. The cut and zoom to Kenny, and the proceeding parallel cut of a close-up on Jean, reveal that Kenny is listening to Jean's words. Thereafter Altman cuts to Barnett, who is talking and laughing with Triplet. The song's lyrics communicate that Jean wants to go back to how their relationship used to be, presumably before she became famous, but Barnett does not hear her words. It is Kenny who hears them and thus receives the message. With his use of close-ups and center framing, Altman allows Jean to speak and gives her the screen-time that she needs to be heard by the spectator.

It is not until the campaign event at the Parthenon that Haven Hamilton and Barbara Jean finally sing together. When they finish their song, Hamilton leaves the stage (not without taking a bow) to let Jean sing her next number. This scene realizes the foreshadowing between Jean, Kenny and Barnett that was suggested at the Opry Belle. Spurred by the song's remembrance of family and a father's love for his mother, Kenny shoots Jean as she sings "Idaho Home." Ness writes, "At the moment when Barbara Jean dares to subvert the patriarchal order by

acknowledging her father's dependence on maternal strength, she is killed."[34] Kenny acts upon the anxiety that almost all the men in the movie feel. The climax of the film is thus a comment on women's attempt to break free from the abusive patriarchy and man's subsequent fear of it.

While the men off-stage rush by Jean's side, Hamilton steps up to the microphone, obviously distressed and wounded, and tries to calm the crowd. The stress proves too much and he thrusts the microphone into Winfred's hand. Unpacking this moment communicates that, when men push women to the brink, women collapse. Unable to handle the consequences the men have created, men shove the torch to women. A woman who has been silenced by men throughout the entire film, Winifred finally gets her chance to take over and sing when the patriarchal system is in shambles.

Women's suppression under the patriarchy is one of the core conflicts in *Nashville*, suggesting that Altman is well aware of women's role and their struggle in a patriarchal society. By contrasting the two royals of country music stars, Altman criticizes the patriarchy for its objectification and exploitation of women. Not only is Altman aware of women as members of society, their conflict with men, and their struggle for independence, but also he allows them the space and agency for their voice to be heard. Women's space and agency in Altman's filmography is fully realized in his personal films of the 1970s.

PERSONAL FILMS AND ART NARRATION CINEMA AS A MEANS OF ESCAPE FROM CLASSICAL NARRATIVE AND PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURE: *3 WOMEN* (1977)

[34] Ness 50.

Robert Altman has received lots of criticism for being as a male director attempting to tap into the female mind, particularly in the context of his personal films. Robert Kolker and Helene Keyssar's viewpoints best exemplify the two perspectives on Altman's personal films. Kolker, in context of *Images*, argues that "Altman's desire to show madness as one manifestation of a particular social-political phenomenon, in this case the cultural oppression of women, may be valid but is also evasive. He is perhaps more successful when he comes to the problem from the outside, as observer, than as analyst."[35] Altman "center[s] on the abnormal psychology of its main character, problems with which [he] continually struggles when exploring the feminine consciousness."[36] In other words, Kolker prefers Altman to take the role as a director who does not place women as subject, but rather as object.

While Kolker's argument about Altman being "evasive" regarding women could be valid, he overlooks the extensive input from Altman's actresses in these personal films. Kolker's reasoning assumes that Altman is the complete mastermind behind the characters. While Robert Altman is the director, considered by many as an *auteur*, it is fundamental to acknowledge the actresses' contributions to their roles in both his ensemble and personal films. For example, the night before filming the Opry Belle scene for *Nashville*, Ronne Blakely wrote the breakdown scene for her character Barbara Jean, one of the film's pivotal moments that explicitly depicts men's exploitation of women. In preparation for *Images,* Suzanne York wrote the unicorn stories that her character narrates throughout the film. The contributions both of these actresses made in their respective films are fundamentally female, as they are written from the female viewpoint. Therefore labeling Altman as the sole creator, thus evasive of the female mind as Kolker suggests, is not true because it rejects the input from the actresses.

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[35] Kolker 389.
[36] Kolker 389.

In contrast to Kolker's opinion on Altman's evasiveness and struggle to explore the feminine consciousness, Helene Keyssar's argues in favor of Altman's approach to place women as subject:

> Equally enigmatic, but perhaps more soluble, is the paradox that Altman encounters of the male director who wishes to pay emphatic and resonant attention to women while sustaining the presence not only of men but of a male perspective as a social reality and political force. Male directors, including Altman, are vulnerable to accusations of illegitimacy if they attempt to present a world projected from a subjective and female point of view. But if, as Altman does in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller,* the women are imaged either from men's points of view or in relation to men, the argument can be made that the interest of the film is still not in women (or women *and* men) but on men and their perspectives on women…plac[ing] the aesthetic and social emphasis on men.[37]

Keyssar outlines the double standard for male directors directing "women's pictures" and makes a just stance for Altman's approach. As a male director exploring the female consciousness, Altman takes the stance of acknowledging the suppression of women under the patriarchal system by foregrounding the female figure, while also perhaps simultaneously acknowledging his anxiety.

Through my study of Altman's films, I align myself with Keyssar's argument. I do not find Altman to be an intruder into the female world, especially in his art-narrative films. Rather, I find that by using the art-narrative cinema as the mode for his personal films, he loosely follows along with Mulvey's call for another avenue of film mode as a means of escape from the patriarchal mode of classical film in order to thoroughly examine patriarchal society's hold on women. I have concluded that because of his perspective of women and gender relations, Altman inadvertently created his own feminist approach: "Altman's Feminism." "Altman's Feminism" consists of either the soul or equal focus on the female characters whose presence furthers the narrative, are treated with respect and/or sympathy, and are given traits that label them as a

[37] Keysssar 206.

subject rather than a sexual object. By engaging feminist film theory of the time, specifically Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," with Altman's personal films, I find the two texts have many parallels, leading me to believe that Altman aims to critique patriarchy's treatment of women, as well as film's treatment of women. While "Altman's Feminism" does not follow along exactly with what Mulvey or other feminist critics call for the goals of feminism,[38] "Altman's Feminism" is the only consistent feminist outlet offered by one of New Hollywood's mavericks.

The film I have chosen to examine with greatest detail, *3 Women*, is considered to be Altman's most ambiguous film, and has lent itself to different readings and themes.[39] Some major themes consist of dreaming and new beginnings,[40] identity theft,[41] and women's coming to terms with "the phallic aspect of male sexuality."[42] There are aspects in these themes that I agree with and that coincide with my reading of the film. However, for the focus my reading, I heavily draw upon Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), a groundbreaking and critical text in feminist film psychoanalytic study, as the basis for my examination of *3 Women*.

In her famous essay, Mulvey explores how the male viewer enjoys women through scopophilia and his identification with the protagonist. Mulvey engages Jacques Lacan's concept of mirror identification for the male's identification with the (male) protagonist. By focusing on

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[38] The Bergman-esque, ambiguity of Altman's personal films poses a problem for many feminists as it communicates that women are inherently complex and illogical. Moreover Altman's feminism is never didactic; its critique of patriarchy is subtle and includes putting responsibility on men for their destructive actions. For many feminists, feminist films do not rely upon the man for strength or support.

[39] Virginia Wright Wexman and Gretchen Bisplinghoff's book "Robert Altman: A Guide to References and Resources" has complied a list of reviews written about *3 Women* from the time of its release up to 1982. Reception of the film is divided, with half enjoying it and the other charging that the ambiguity leaves the film to be a sloppy and pretentious mess.

[40] Marsha Kinder, "The Art of Dreaming in Three Women and Providence: Structures of the Self." *Film Quarterly* Autumn 1977: 10-18. PDF.

[41] Thompson 104.

[42] Glen O. Gabbard and Krin Gabbard, *Psychiatry and the Cinema*. (Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1999) 221.

the concepts of identification, particularly mirrors, self-projection, and symbolism in phallic-like objects, I argue that by reading *3 Women* in the psychoanalytic template common in feminist film theory of the period renders the film as an "Altman Feminist" film that simultaneously proposes a breaking from the classical/patriarchal mode of film.

From the film's opening credits, the tension between Man and Women, specifically Woman's suppression under Man, is established. The film opens with a slow, lazy tracking shot of Willie painting a mural on the wall of an empty, dry swimming pool. Occasionally soothing rushes of water cover bottom of the frame and mural; the mural depicts a maze-like city and, to its right, four naked reptilian creatures, three female and one male. The three female creatures, one of them pregnant, represent the three women in the film: Millie (Shelley Duvall), Pinky (Sissy Spacek) and Willie (Janice Rule). The male creature represents Edgar (Robert Fortier), whose assertive posture foregrounds the phallus, terrifies and repels the women. When the three actresses' names appear in the credits, the names triangulate to surround the male creature, overwhelming and trapping the lone creature. As this occurs water rushes over the image and covers the entire frame, potentially symbolizing some sort of rebirth. After depicting the mural, the camera zooms into a hazy dissolve and cuts to the pool water of the elderly rehabilitation center where Millie and Pinky work. The juxtaposition of opening credits and the rehabilitation center foreshadow the inevitable death of Edgar, the symbolizer of the patriarchy, and the birth of a matriarchy.

As already illustrated, Altman's previous films reflected upon and critiqued the patriarchal system. The ambiguity in *3 Women* strives to analyze "the way the unconscious of

patriarchal society has structured film form" that Mulvey outlines in her essay.[43] Central to Mulvey's psychoanalytic critique is "the pleasure in being looked at" and "identification with the image seen."[44] These two aspects, specifically of male's pleasure in cinema, are also central concepts to *3 Women*, specifically in relation Millie and Pinky and their relationship to mirrors. A crucial difference between the two texts is that, in Mulvey's essay, men are identified with the image in the mirror and do the looking. In contrast, the person who does the looking in *3 Women*, and who likewise ends up receiving the look, is female. While this look could be coded as female desire, which would follow with the male anxiety's about lesbianism, the look comes across as a child's adoration for an older, seemingly more "adult" person and woman's obsession with her image for the male population.

Identification with the mirror in cinema in Mulvey's essay is associated with male's projection of himself onto the protagonist. The mirror motif in *3 Women* acts similarly in that Pinky sees Millie and projects herself onto Millie. Mulvey writes that "[r]ecognition [of the image] is thus overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognized is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject, which, reintrojected as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of identification with others."[45] Pinky is presented as a blank slate with no defining identity. As Pinky looks in the mirror, she averts her gaze to Millie, seeing her as not only as her focus of identification, but also her ego. Mulvey's essay in comparison to *3 Women* is strong, in that Mulvey writes, "the cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss

[43] Mulvey 711.
[44] Mulvey 713, 715.
[45] Mulvey 714.

of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego."[46] Pinky is obviously fascinated by Millie and wants to be "just like [her]." Pinky, however, seems to have no ego and thus attempts to, whether positive or negative, appropriate Millie's as her own.

Before further analyzing the women and their situations, it is important to explore the female's counterpart, the male, and his representation. As I previously mentioned, Edgar is the established as the dominant male creature in the mural. Edgar's power is inextricably linked to his gun. Much like the phallus, the gun is attached to him and is never forgotten. The viewer cannot escape his relationship to it as it is always brought forth. The first time the viewer meets Edgar, the camera focuses on a close-up on Edgar's hand as he twirls his gun; it is only after this trick that Altman cuts to Edgar's face. After the cut, Edgar tells the girls to be careful of the snake. Edgar proceeds to reveal a rubber rattlesnake beneath a rock, thus creating an inextricable link between Edgar, the gun, and the phallic snake.

The snake motif reoccurs in Willie's murals. The rattlesnake, especially in Willie's murals, recalls the image of Benjamin Franklin's Join, or Die cartoon. As a whole, the rattlesnake is a powerful yet dangerous creature that has the potential to strike and kill at any minute. It is the epitome of the potential of death. Destroyed, however, all its potential power is obliterated. It is clear that there are two perspectives of the snake. For the male, it communicates power and masculinity, but for the female it harbors the potential to strike and kill at any moment. Through the symbols of the gun and the snake, it is clear that the perception of masculinity in this film is that it is life threatening and dangerously powerful.

One of the two avenues of escape from the castration anxiety for the male is "complete disavowal of castration by substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure into a

[46] Mulvey 714.

fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous."[47] Edgar follows this avenue of escape by assuming relations with all three women, one of whom is his wife. While not exactly in line with Mulvey's understanding, Edgar nevertheless debases the women by seeing them only as a sexual object. Later, however, he explicitly reveals the male castration anxiety, or perhaps better the anxiety of women ever possessing the penis (thus, the power) in his line: "I'd rather face a thousand crazy savages than one woman who's learned how to shoot."

The dead, small amusement park that Edgar runs is called Dodge City. In American history, Dodge City is considered to be the first established settlement of non-indigenous people in the West. By representing this faux Dodge City as the historical Dodge City, the film suggests that the society created by men hundreds of years ago is dead. All that is left of society is pleasure, as productivity and work have been exchanged for leisure and play. Willie, not Edgar, is left to tend to the little business they receive, much like the unsung workingwomen of the frontier. This dead town indicates the death of an era, an era ruled by patriarchy, and the coming of a matriarchy.

Having established Edgar's character and what he represents, it is easier to analyze the three women's place in the film and their personalities in relation to patriarchal society. Pinky and Millie are explicitly defined as a pair throughout the film. The first time the spectator sees of Pinky is when she waits in the doctor's office in the rehabilitation spa. She stands quite still in the doctors' office looking through the glass window at Millie. In this glass window there are faint reflections of the staff and elders in the spa, however the image of Pinky is not reflected. This glass window serves as a barrier between Pinky and the scene she sees in front of her. Christian Metz writes that "[f]ilm is like a mirror. But it differs from the primordial mirror in one

[47] Mulvey 718.

essential point: although, as in the latter, everything may come to be projected, there is one thing and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator's own body. In a certain emplacement, the mirror suddenly becomes clear glass."[48] This glass window foreshadows the functions of the mirror, as Pinky does not see herself in the mirror because she is gazing at Millie. The camera cuts from Pinky to a medium long shot of Millie walking an elder woman in the water. This brief segment depicts that Pinky is essentially watching a scene play out in front of her, a world separated by a screen (much like the cinema does for the spectator), at least very briefly.

From the beginning of Pinky and Mille's relationship, there is a setup for the projection and identification of cinema. After being introduced, Altman composes the image as a medium two shot of Millie and Pinky and centers the bathroom's mirror so it captures the upper halves of their bodies. Millie looks into the mirror and fixes her hair and make-up while Pinky looks onto Millie's reflection, not hers. Metz states that "the child sees itself as an other and beside another" when looking into the mirror and it is where "the child's ego is formed by identification with its like."[49] While Pinky is older than the identification stage that Metz mentions (roughly six to eighteen months), as aforementioned Pinky is presented as a blank slate without any personality, thus setting up the concept of projection. Additionally her attire and personality is like that of a little girl, connecting Pinky to the child identification aspect in the mirror to projection. Pinky's gaze towards Millie's image communicates her desire to be like Millie and the subsequent misidentification with her. Kaja Silverman writes that "Pinky represents the prototypical daughter" and that "Like a very young girl, [Pinky] derives her only sense of identity from Milly

[48] Christian Metz, "Identification, Mirror." *Film Theory & Criticism*. Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.) 696.
[49] Metz 696.

[sic], appropriating her robe, her bed, her name, and her social security number."[50] Thus, like how the cinema encourages the spectator to identify with the protagonist, Pinky identifies with Millie's character.

After Pinky wakes up from her coma, she emerges with Millie's personality and believes she actually is Millie. However, unlike the real Millie, Pinky fulfills Millie's ambitions by becoming popular and liked by men at the Purple Sage Apartments. This Pinky, like a young rebellious adolescent, wears make-up that covers her freckles, wears lipstick and deep pink blush, and frequently talks back to Millie. Most importantly, this new Pinky is not afraid of the phallus like the young Pinky was once. Before her accident, Pinky hesitated at the sight and flinched at the sound of guns. Now Edgar, like he previously did with the real Millie, takes Pinky out to the shooting range to teach her how to shoot a gun. Pinky easily handles the gun and shoots it with confidence and power. This Pinky is embracing life with the male and, thus, the life of the fabricated woman.

If Pinky is established as the innocent child, then it worth noting Millie is established as the consumer mother. Millie's physical appearance is her preoccupation throughout the first half of the film. From her obsessive comments about dating to her sign "Clean is sexy," it is clear that Millie's goals are for the male fantasy. In addition to the mirror's function of child identification for Pinky, the mirrors also function to "demonstrate the dual self-concept of woman as both an object for male observation and an observer of herself as such an object."[51] For the first half of the film, the men ignore and ridicule Mille. After Pinky's suicide attempt, when Millie is not preoccupied with her image, men take an interest in Millie. For example, after Pinky's doctor

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[50] Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.) 128.
[51] Self 52.

tells Millie about Pinky's current condition, he asks Millie out on a date. Preoccupied with Pinky, Millie hardly reacts to his request and says no. Indeed, Shelley Duvall is quite beautiful in this film as her best features are highlighted and the flawed aspects, previously exaggerated in her Altman films, minimized. In his chapter on art-cinema narration, Robert Self states that (in context of *Thieves Like Us*):

> Unable to see [Duvall] as an erotic object, the spectator experiences the social dichotomies between the pathetic body as subject and the beautiful body as object; the viewer focuses reflexively on the distance between the pleasurable looking afforded by romance even in a film noir and the painful (almost embarrassed) looking afforded by Altman's movies. (51-52)

Thus, in order to minimize the dichotomy between "pathetic" and "beautiful body", there is a deliberate intention to minimize Duvall's usually look and beautify her for her role as Millie.

Duvall's physical features in this film communicate the fabricated woman that society and mass media markets to women. The fabricated woman is a false, elusive woman conjured by men, much like the fabricated woman in Hollywood films. Millie is a regular reader of women's magazines and catalogues. Most of what Millie says sounds like it came from those catalogues and not her original thoughts. Whatever personality she had before has been hopelessly distorted by consumerism. She organizes her cooking recipes by the time they take to make (written by Duvall herself) and is very particular about the set up for her dinner parties. "I'm famous for my dinner parties," she tells Pinky. There does not seem to be any sincerity in her words, as everything she talks about has to do with her domestic abilities, concluding that she is a product of the consumerist society. By appropriating Millie's character, Pinky runs the risk of becoming yet another product of a man-made consumerist society. Thus both Millie and Pinky depict the woman brought up and cultivated in a patriarchal society.

If Pinky and Millie are the girls still learning about society, Willie is the experienced, wise old woman who knows about the limits of patriarchal society for women. Willie acknowledges the difference between woman and man in her murals; a difference that man has deemed them the supposed powerful and all mighty. That power is later lent to the women when Edgar teaches them how to shoot a gun. When Edgar teaches Millie how to shoot, Millie goes for the neck. When he takes her to the range, Pinky tells Edgar to give her a swig of beer before she shoots the gun. The last gun scene is of Willie shooting her snake mural. By implying that Edgar is the snake, her mural and its multiple bullet holes recall the Gadsden snake and its potential to kill. This sequence confirms that Willie is capable of violence, thus capable of going from passive (painting her story on a mural) to active (solving the problem) by taking control of the phallus.

3 Women both acknowledges and executes the masculine fear of women gaining power through the phallus to change the women's situation. Mulvey writes that the female "connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure."[52] Women's lack of the penis is something Altman explicitly establishes in the opening credits to the film through the contrast between the female creatures and the male creature. As aforementioned, the phallus' presence is continued through using the gun to represent the phallus. Altman shows all three women taking up the phallus (gun) and eventually gaining the power that Edgar fears so much. At the film Millie tells the Coca-Cola boy a "gun accident" killed Edgar. However it can be interpreted that the women killed Edgar.

[52] Mulvey 718.

In view of the film Silverman writes that the women have a "troubled relationship to language," making it one of the reasons that *3 Women* "is certainly not a feminist text."[53] I disagree with such a bold claim. The language that Silverman speaks of is exclusively "language of the patriarchy.[54] If anything the film shows the women's transgression from a language that is filtered and fostered for men to a language where the women can effectively and clearly talk to one another. Therefore the women's "inability to manipulate language" further critiques patriarchal society because it is not inclusive of women. This inability to speak the language calls for change, much like Mulvey's call for change to turn to avant-garde cinema for positive portrayals of women. The women's inability to communicate in patriarchal society leads them to abandon men in favor of forming a matriarchy and developing a language that they can speak. It is particularly notable that Willie speaks most of her dialogue at the end of the film. Her final line, and the last line of the movie is, " While the ending seems to suggest that their life is not perfect, it is a step higher from living in a world where women are told falsehoods for the advantage of man. Whatever the case, the women do not destroy one another at the end. Instead, they take care of the problem by abandoning man all together and live in solitude.

CONCLUSION

With films like *3 Women*, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller,* and *Nashville*, films that so heavily depend upon the presence of women, it is difficult to not read Altman's films as having a

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[53] Silverman 127, 126.

[54] Mulvey 712; To further this point of language being created for patriarchy, Dale Spender writes, in the introduction to her book, *Man-Made Language*, "One semantic rule which we can see in operation in the language is that of the male-as-norm" which "divides humanity not into two equal parts…but into those who are plus male and those who are minus male" (3).

feminist quality. "Altman's Feminism" concerns itself with the underlying theme of women as subjects in not only the film world, but also in society itself. By examining (and leaning his sympathy to) the women in his films, Altman proves to be a sort of feminist outlet in the male-dominated New Hollywood era.

However this thesis only touches on the films that he directed in the 1970s. In addition to further examining his 1970s films, "Altman's Feminism" can be found throughout his entire filmography, starting from *That Cold Day in the Park* to *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006). It is clear that the presence of women in his films is something that he preoccupied throughout his career, particularly films like *HealtH* (1980), *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982), *Cookie's Fortune* (1999) and *Kansas City* (1996). These films, and many others, classify as "Altman Feminist" and can analyzed through a feminist lens.

In addition to examining the rest of Altman's filmography, his films can also be analyzed through a larger discourse of feminist psychoanalytic film theory text, or even through different types of feminist lens, such as an intersectional lens. The viewpoints of what feminism is and what it should be has changed over the years, so it is possible to critique the films based on when they were released, the general feminist sentiment, and contemporary viewpoints of feminism. For example, one could compare the independent women in Altman's 1980s films to some of the general feminist backlash stereotypes of the period, like the psycho independent career woman Alex (Glenn Close) of *Fatal Attraction* (1987). Overall, there are many avenues in which Altman's films and their representation can be analyzed and discussed that will label them as "Altman Feminist."

While there will be a few films that, like *M*A*S*H*, that do not meet the "Altman Feminist" criteria, the overall body of work suggests a promising outcome. For a director who

began his successful film career during a misogynist period, Altman's body of work, especially that during the New Hollywood era, is feminist in its focus and agency of women. Regardless if it follows along with the exact feminist ideals, Altman's work should be highlighted and recognized for what it contributes to the representation of women on-screen.

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Robert Altman Filmography

The Delinquents (1957)

The James Dean Story (1957)

Countdown (1968)

The Cold Day in the Park (1969)

*M*A*S*H* (1970)

Brewster McCloud (1970)

McCabe & Mrs. Miller (1971)

Images (1972)

The Long Goodbye (1972)

Thieves Like Us (1974)

California Split (1974)

Nashville (1975)

Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson (1976)

3 Women (1977)

A Wedding (1978)

Quintet (1979)

A Perfect Couple (1979)

HealtH (1980)

Popeye (1980)

Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean (1982)

Streamers (1983)

Secret Honor (1984)

O.C. & Stiggs (1984)

Fool for Love (1985)

Beyond Therapy (1987)

Aria (1987)

Vincent & Theo (1990)

The Player (1992)

Short Cuts (1993)

Prêt-à-Porter (1994)

Kansas City (1996)

The Gingerbread Man (1998)

Cookie's Fortune (1999)

Dr. T & the Women (2000)

Gosford Park (2001)

The Company (2003)

A Prairie Home Companion (2006)