"Irony is a Cheap Shot": Robert Altman, Luis Buñuel, and the Maneuvers of Comic Deconstruction

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ABSTRACT

In 2006, the year of his death, Robert Altman received an Honorary Academy Award for his lifetime achievement. Despite this belated recognition by the Hollywood establishment, his films since the late 1960s have been regarded as highly critical and aesthetically complex forms of interrogating American culture and society. Indeed, Altman was one of the last active auteurs from the era of the New Hollywood Cinema who had begun their careers by deconstructing Hollywood formulas and American myths. Focusing on his early work and, in particular, on aspects of the comic, this essay examines how Altman's films shaped, and complicated, what has been called his democratic aesthetic. By juxtaposing Altman with the late work of Luis Buñuel, I will argue that a crucial, if ambiguous, achievement of the American art cinema lies in its inter-relation of comic deconstruction and performative self-creation.

1. Introduction

Most critics would probably agree that Robert Altman's films represent a unique contribution to the American cinema. Yet it is striking to note that although Altman has been hailed as a genuine *auteur*, there have been relatively few in-depth analyses of his work.[1] His films seem to challenge not only audience expectations but also a critical discourse trying to identify the peculiar Altman signature and to grasp the nature of his uniqueness. In a recent study, Robert Self links Altman with an art cinema narration characterized by ambiguity and reflexivity.[2] Since this mode of narration is usually associated with the European cinema of the 1950s from where it began to influence the New Hollywood Cinema, Self's study presents Altman as a director whose style is decidedly European. On the other hand, critics have repeatedly pointed out that they regard him as highly symptomatic of American culture. As Helene Keyssar puts it, "the Altman signature is emphatically and specifically American, both in the territories it explores and in its styles of exploration" (5).

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[1] Robert Altman's long career has enjoyed an uneven scholarly reception. The early phase of his work has been covered relatively broadly by Plecki; Kolker; Keyssar; O'Brien. The late phase, especially the 1990s, has been studied less comprehensively. Robert Self's book is among the few attempting to cover the whole range of Altman's films.

[2] The term "art cinema narration" was introduced by David Bordwell in an influential analysis. In essence he argues that the European art cinema developed in reaction to the normative influence of Hollywood cinema. Key elements of its alternative mode of narration were a different (more expressive) notion of realism, a more ambiguous conception of character, and a higher degree of reflexivity or narrational commentary (cf. Bordwell 205-33).

Recent discussions of his work are thus divided over the question of how it should be framed: Should it be seen as a Europeanized perspective on America, or does it represent an American vision indigenous to and, indeed, inseparable from American culture? Critics like Helene Keyssar, who have argued for the latter, point to the notion of a *democratization* of the movies as a major impulse in Robert Altman's work, stressing its multiplicity and diversity of points of view. By looking at questions of narration, style, and theme, I want to examine and evaluate this notion. How can Altman's films be related to the idea of a democratization of American cinema? In what ways have they shaped a particular democratic aesthetic?

I will argue that, on the one hand, Robert Altman develops a dehierarchized mode of narration which establishes a more egalitarian fictional space. Yet, on the other hand, his core elements of comedy and satire make this fictional space more complicated and ambiguous. I want to suggest, however, that the comic dimension in his work has to be seen in conjunction with the performative and improvisational aspects. In order to reevaluate this conjunction, I will compare Altman with the European art cinema of the 1970s, in particular with the late 'French' phase of Luis Buñuel, which has recently been rediscovered (cf. Kinder). Surprisingly, one aspect, which is highly significant for this period of film history, has received relatively little attention: the different comic and satirical elements which served as the crucial stylistic devices for a radical cultural critique. The clash and conflict of generations shaping the post-1968-era often found their most poignant expression in what could be called a hostile aesthetic of satirical deconstruction. Consequently, the ridiculing and mocking spirit of these films will serve as a point of comparison between the European and American art cinema. In particular, I want to compare Buñuel's *Le Charme Discret de la Bourgeoisie* (1972) with Altman's *A Wedding* (1978), both of which center around ritualized 'bourgeois' forms of interaction in order to mount a general cultural critique by way of their satirical deconstruction.

Following this comparison, I will argue that there are many similarities between Buñuel's and Altman's auteurist re/vision of the bourgeois subject and its concomitant ways of cinematic storytelling—such as causality and linearity. However, I also want to highlight their fundamental differences: While Buñuel emphasizes the inversion of hierarchical social structures, Altman develops an alternative perspective that stresses performance and improvisation. The films of Buñuel and Altman thus introduce two different modes of comic and satirical deconstruction, which I see as symptomatic for the differences of the European and American art cinemas. The European mode aims for the liberation of the subject from oppressive social forces, while the American mode establishes new situational frameworks in which the definition of the subject can be collectively challenged and changed. A shift of the satirical sensibilities becomes apparent: from modernity's notion of the subject's (suppressed) authenticity to the postmodern notion of performative self-creation.[3]

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[3] By claiming a symptomatic relevance, I want to suggest primarily a way of differentiating Altman's work in the context of Bordwell's notion of art cinema narration. I do not mean to imply in any way that, historically or aesthetically, the European and American art cinema(s)

2. Robert Altman's Narrative Space

In an insightful analysis Robert Kolker has called Altman a "director of pe-ripheries" (320). He goes on to say that his films "are quiet attempts at a decon-struction of the narrative and generic truths that are taken for granted in Ameri-can film" (322). Altman gained his reputation as a deconstructionist in the 1970s. On a formal level he was interrogating numerous genres of the classical Holly-wood cinema, such as the western, gangster, and war movies or buddy and private eye films.[4] Thematically, too, films such as *M*A*S*H* (1970) or *Brewster McCloud* (1970) were grounded in a subversive stance of protest and unrest developing out of the counterculture. Altman not only deconstructed Hollywood genres, he also took apart American myths: the frontier experience, political institutions, or the dream of success—to give a few examples.[5]

At the same time, however, Altman moved beyond the biting genre parodies. With *M*A*S*H*, Nashville* (1975), and *A Wedding*, he created a particular way of storytelling which has been called a multi-layered narration. Its core features were the intersection of multiple storylines, overlapping dialogue, and large casts which deflected attention away from a single hero or star. The visual style em-phasized frequent panning and zooming while the sound track usually included a wild mixture of dialogue, mediated sources, and music (cf. Kolker 303-13; Altman par. 6-29; Self vii-xxiii).

Like the genre parodies, the multi-layered narration continued to deconstruct two major aspects of classical Hollywood cinema: on the one hand, the linearity of narrative progression, on the other, the focus on individual heroes. Yet it also established a new and original aesthetic form. With *Nashville,* in particular, Alt-man presented himself as the 'director of peripheries,' moving the accidental and marginal, the repressed and non-conventional to the center of attention. As a re-sult, the pivotal impression of Altman's early films is an overriding sense of dehi-erarchization. This applies to all levels of narration and style, yet the sound track, in particular, creates this impression so that the process of mixing sounds takes on a new significance. Overlapping dialogue, mediated sound sources and sound effects are brought together in an effort to decenter the traditional narrative func-tion of dialogue. Mixing thus becomes the decisive aesthetic device shaping the narrative flow and creating a dense network of storylines (cf. Altman par. 15).

Indeed, films like *Nashville* and *A Wedding* may appear to be confusing and incoherent at first, yet on closer inspection it becomes apparent that events and people are clearly related. Certain linking devices provide these and later films up

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can be conceptualized as distinct or homogeneous entities, even though Altman's predilection for performative self-creation was shared to some degree by John Cassavetes and the early work of Martin Scorsese.

[4] For a comprehensive narratological, economic and historical account of the so-called clas-sical Hollywood cinema cf. Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson.

[5] Altman may be regarded as one of the most consistent auteurs attempting to deconstruct American myths. As Murphy and Harder have shown, other films of the New Hollywood Cin-ema were often critical of contemporary America but also firmly grounded in the American tradition of populist thinking.

to the 1990s with a sense of structure. Altman thus establishes a dehierarchized narrative space with many different characters and intersecting storylines, yet he does not forego the notion of order. Sometimes it follows the logic of cause and effect, sometimes events are linked arbitrarily and randomly; yet even in these latter cases the linking devices create associational counterpoints that form recognizable patterns (cf. Kolker 306-13; Self 266-77). Consequently, many of Altman's films, by abandoning the linearity of the classical Hollywood cinema, follow a logic of circularity and variation akin to a musical composition.

The movement away from linearity and heroic individuals towards an 'interanimation' of multiple storylines is an important characteristic of Altman's dehierarchized narratives. As Keyssar observes, their power lies "not in melting diversity in the pot of American culture but in the interanimation of authentically conflicting voices" (5). This narrational process shifts the focus from individuals to groups and highlights the codes of their interaction. By stressing structural analogies between characters and social spheres, the individual is seen to be inextricably related to and overdetermined by groups as well as larger social forces. As Paul Giles puts it, Altman's films of the 1970s "delineate landscapes of community and ritual where events unfold with a random contingency which is never purely aleatory, but rather imbued with a sense of zany inevitability" (163).

The relative openness of Altman's films has been interpreted as a celebration of multiple voices, styles, and points of view (cf. Keyssar 5). Furthermore, it is regarded as an empowerment of the audience, as Robert Kolker observes: "The open narrative construction—the flow, the sense of process and accident that so many of his films achieve—attempts to take apart the very subject they create, deconstruct them by exposing their manufacture and affirming the fact that it is the viewer who must make sense of them" (380). Both notions—the multiplicity of voices and the heightened activity of the viewers—support the argument that Altman's dehierarchized narratives aim for a democratization of the filmic fiction. Indeed, the pattern of overlapping and intersecting storylines can be understood as a powerful metaphor for the vision of a less hierarchical, less prejudiced, less repressive, and, eventually, more equal society: power relations are inverted, heroic individualism is deconstructed, the margin moves to the center. Yet if we look more closely at aspects of comedy and performance in Altman's films, we must concede that this symbolic form of democratization is a complicated textual process, characterized by internal contradictions and sometimes also a profound sense of failure.

3. Comic Deconstruction and Questions of Performance

Robert Altman can be regarded as one of the great humorists of the New Hollywood Cinema, which, in general, was less prone to the comic than to post-traumatic paranoia or the melodramatic.[6] He successfully merged high and low com-

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[6] The early prankish and adolescent humor of films like *Brewster McCloud* was certainly echoed in *Harold and Maude* (Hal Ashby, 1971), yet I find Altman's more mature humorous

edy, slapstick and sophisticated wit. Going beyond the early genre parodies, films like *A Wedding* or *The Player* (1992) moved into more complex forms of satire. Yet the comic elements in his work have also provoked the most severe criticism from scholars and audiences. Asked about his use of irony in *Short Cuts*, a film which is based on the decidedly non-ironic stories of Raymond Carver, the director said: "I agree that real art is *without* irony. I think that irony is a product of something. It's not the reason for doing something. Irony is a cheap shot" (Stewart 3). Noticeable in many Altman films, this notion of irony as a 'cheap shot' has led to charges of misogyny and cynicism, of "holding far too many of his characters in a chronic state of contempt" (Sterritt, Introduction ix).[7]

Perhaps it is more appropriate to say that Altman's sense of the comic oscillates in unexpected ways between amusement and aggression, good-natured fun and intentional insult. Thus, his parodies can turn into caricature, his satires may become farcical, and the mild forms of irony can shift unexpectedly into the more aggressive and hostile modes of sarcasm and ridicule. In *Brewster McCloud*, an early example of this kind of aggressive humor, bird droppings cause the death of numerous representatives of the cultural establishment. Altman assimilates the mocking stance of the counterculture but pushes it so far that the laughter turns into a weapon designed to attack and hurt.

Another case in point is *A Wedding*, where the principle of multiple storylines becomes the core comic strategy for ridiculing individual behavior and self-delusions. The characters see themselves as unique human beings. Yet by continuously cross-cutting between different storylines, they are constantly related to each other. In the end, they are shown to be just like everybody else, equally pathetic and ridiculous (cf. Kolker 378-80).[8] As Paul Giles has argued, Altman subscribes to an analogical imagination, in which the characters can be mirrored and reflected in seemingly infinite ways (156). As important as this mirroring device is for deconstructing the tradition of heroic individualism, it may also create a profound sense of symbolic humiliation.

To be sure, irony, parody, and satire are Altman's core strategies for formulating a cultural critique—his way of addressing issues of inequality, racism, greed, the abuse of power, or the absurdities of modern life. Yet in many cases this critique seems to be unable to go beyond its stance of mockery and ridicule. What, we may ask, is the conceptual alternative to the world depicted and comically deconstructed? In Altman's films of the 1970s, the counterculture partially serves as an alternative sphere. But this hardly develops into a coherent concep-

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work to be indeed quite unique in the context of the New Hollywood Cinema. In an interesting analysis Christian Keathley elaborates on Gilles Deleuze's assessment of the New Hollywood Cinema as being 'caught' in the affection image introducing the notion of a post-traumatic cycle of films.

[7] For an analysis of the relationship between Carver and Altman, cf. Boddy; Scofield; and Decker "Alltag."

[8] The criticism of this particular kind of humor is misguided, however, if it focuses primarily on moral or ethical issues. Rather, in some unfortunate cases, which admittedly happen in Altman's films, the humor simply does not fit into the overall narrative and stylistic patterns, and thus weakens the internal consistency of the auteur's signature.

tual framework.[9] Indeed, in many films the social vision is reduced to a notion of self-defense: The characters, who are basically passive, can only *react* against the dominant culture (cf. Kolker 343-46).

This complicates the notion of a democratic aesthetic. As I have argued, the multi-layered narration creates a more egalitarian fictional space. Yet the cultural critique by way of irony, parody, or satire remains in a subservient role to its individual and systemic targets. Irony as a 'cheap shot' or a 'product of something' may briefly subvert and shock, in the end it remains in a structural position of dependency. Thus, on the one hand, Altman's comic strategies support the democratic impulse of his films by inverting power relations. On the other hand, however, by refusing to formulate a coherent alternative vision, his critical stance lacks conviction in a political and moral sense. In fact, many of his films undermine the very *idea* of an alternative vision, canceling out the fantasy that the *auteur* as humorist might change the world.

Is this a shortcoming on Altman's part, a case of postmodern non-commitment? Only if we focus exclusively on the logic of comic modes. If we also take into account the improvisational and spontaneous atmosphere of his films, we can appreciate that Altman's visionary quality does not lie so much in a social or political alternative but rather in a performative space that stresses the ubiquity of struggle: How can the individual express him- or herself freely in a world dominated by alien social conventions and sign systems? Like the comic element, the improvisational atmosphere seems to develop out of a search for individual freedom and independence. Yet by bearing witness to an ongoing struggle against clichés and role models, it goes beyond the stance of deconstruction. Rather, it becomes an attempt to find new codes of behavior and new modes of subjectivity by deconstructing worn-out traditional clichés. The characters never arrive at a coherent or final sense of self. Yet they can try to shape the process of struggling against dominant images and role models—for instance, in the performances of Elliott Gould (*The Long Goodbye* [1973], *California Split* [1974]), Shelley Duvall (*Thieves Like Us* [1974], *Three Women* [1977]), Lily Tomlin (*Nashville*), Sissy Spacek (*Three Women*), or Jennifer Jason Leigh (*Kansas City* [1996]).

The improvisational aesthetic in Altman's films is therefore not just funny. It can be understood as an attempt to go beyond the objects of ridicule and thereby to reinvent the self. Though this fails more often than not, it aims for the emergence of new modes of behavior developing out of the dismantled old sense of community. The social vision, then, does not lie in an external utopian alternative but in changing the social space from *within*. With *Kansas City*, we can see that Altman's implicit model for this process seems to be taken from music (cf. Sterritt, "Director"). Jazz and blues musicians improvising against the background of established ground-rules—like harmonies, beat, or bar structure—take on a metaphoric function. Finding and creating new riffs, licks, and styles on a musical

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[9] In a more general sense, this is also Thomas Elsaesser's core question about the historical legacy of the New Hollywood Cinema: Were the countercultural energies a genuine alternative or merely a way of reinvigorating the commercial imperatives of a production system in a state of crisis, which subsequently re-emerged stronger than ever before (cf. Elsaesser 44)?

instrument symbolizes the quest for individuality in an otherwise hostile society. The improvisational mode of a jamming session gives rise to an emphatic sense of individuality, which can, however, only be a fleeting instance of freedom. *Kansas City* epitomizes this notion, yet I want to suggest that this improvisational dynamic is already a feature of Altman's early work allowing us to differentiate it from the contemporaneous European art cinema.

4. Comic Modes in *Le Charme Discret de la Bourgeoisie* (1972) and *A Wedding* (1978)

The relationship between the filmmakers of the New Hollywood Cinema to, on the one hand, European cinema, and, on the other, the tradition of Hollywood, was a major catalyst for the period of experimentation in the 1960s.[10] Altman's position in this dynamic of intertextual borrowings, rewritings, and cross-fertilizations was interpreted by Robin Wood in the 1970s as a case of 'cultural schizophrenia': "obsessed with America and with being American, he casts continual longing looks to Europe" (33). In retrospect, however, it becomes clear that, though coming from different backgrounds and traditions, Buñuel's and Altman's work in the early and mid-1970s actually shared a number of characteristics.[11] Structurally they were abandoning the concept of linearity in favor of a musical theme-and-variation pattern, stylistically they relied heavily on different forms of derisive humor, and thematically their work was permeated by the disruptive power of bodily needs as witnessed in the ritualized experience of consumption, excretion, sexuality, and death (cf. Giles 156-58; Catlett 46-49).

The heavy reliance on comic elements, in particular, may serve as a crucial point of comparison. In an assessment that could equally be applied to Altman, John Flasher and Douglas Radcliff-Umstead argue that Buñuel attempted to satirize social institutions: "With derisive humor this director attacks the hypocrisy of the powerful individuals who abuse their advantages of wealth and position to compel others to submit to their pleasure" (7). They go on to say: "Humor for Buñuel is a trenchant irony that undermines and demolishes the bourgeois world that the filmmaker finds to be ultimately destructive of human potential" (7). For both European and American auteurist cinema in the 1970s, ridiculing rituals

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[10] For an introduction to the cultural and historical complexities of the New Hollywood Cinema and the discourse on auteurism in the 1970s, cf. Elsaesser; Horwarth; King; Cook; and Corrigan. The term 'New Hollywood' has been contested in recent writings. For example, Thomas Schatz has argued that the New Hollywood Cinema was only a (minor) transitional period while the blockbuster-cinema epitomized by Steven Spielberg in the 1970s should rightfully be called the 'New' Hollywood (cf. Schatz 8-11).

[11] The surrealist background of Buñuel is obviously a major difference, yet comparing Altman's early films with Luis Buñuel's late work, one must keep in mind that Altman was a latecomer to the cinema, having worked primarily for television. Born in 1900 (Buñuel) and 1925 (Altman), the two filmmakers were actually merely a generation apart. Conversely, Buñuel's long career has been reinterpreted along the modernity/postmodernity-divide where he is understood to be a transitional figure whose late work shares many of the concerns that Altman was engaging with at roughly the same time (on Buñuel's intermediary status, cf. Fuentes).

furthered a weakening and destabilization of established institutions, while the deeply hostile character of the comic elements was often fed by the ubiquitous atmosphere of violence and terror.

The comic mode can thus be seen as a major device for both Buñuel and Altman, allowing them to formulate a radical cultural critique. In a more general sense, and taking into account theories of comedy, the comic elements in the art-cinema of the 1970s were often grounded in a constellation of desire that, according to Freud, is characteristic of the tendentious joke. They ridiculed an enemy by drawing on aspects that were hitherto forbidden to be used consciously or explicitly (cf. 98). In many instances, then, the films relied on obscene or aggressive elements in order to set free repressed sources of illicit pleasure.

Going beyond Freud's analysis of jokes, literary theorist Karlheinz Stierle has argued that a major component of the comic mode is the *failure* of actions resulting from a fundamental discrepancy between appearance and reality. This discrepancy is funny since it reveals the characteristic of *Fremdbestimmtheit* (heteronomy) which, according to Stierle, represents the core element of comic actions: "Objektive Voraussetzung für Komik ist, daß das Scheitern einer Handlung sinnfällig wird als Fremdbestimmtheit eines Handelns" (238). If the subject of an action is suddenly transformed into an object of an action, then the comic contrast, or incongruity, highlights the heteronomous forces at work in the fictional world.

As happens continuously in the silent comedies of Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton, the subject becomes an object, lost in an unpredictable space of action. Consequently, the self-delusions of a human being as rational and supposedly in control of his or her environment are revealed. For example, in *Modern Times* (1936) Chaplin's tramp working at the conveyor belt is unable to stop the machine-like movement of his hands once he turns away for his coffee break, thereby demonstrating that it is not he who is working the machine but the machine which is shaping the worker. In this classic case of a modernist critique, heteronomy as the source of the comic is caused by the loss of control. However, it can also have numerous other reasons, among them the (Freudian) breaking through of an unfulfilled and suppressed desire taking hold of the subject, or the (screwballish) collision of incompatible contrasts pointing to a basic conflict of cultural norms (cf. Stierle 260). All of these cases of heteronomy play a role in *Le Charme Discret de la Bourgeoisie* and *A Wedding*, yet, as I will argue below, both films also clearly establish a dominant comic mode.

Coming towards the end of his career, Buñuel regarded his film to belong, together with *La Voie Lactée* (1969) and *Le Fantôme de la Liberté* (1974), to a trilogy devoted to the search for truth, social rituals, and personal morality (cf. Buñuel 242). Filled with references to the political struggles of the late 1960s—feminism, terrorism, poverty, the Vietnam War, torture, the student protests, the legacy of dictatorships—the film consists of a loosely connected collage of scenes, dreams, memories, and allegorical images. A group of people belonging to the French bourgeoisie (including Fernando Rey as the ambassador of an imaginary South American country called Miranda) repeatedly assemble to have dinner together only to realize that, for various reasons, their dinner party is frustrated. Woven into this theme of the aborted dinner party are stories about rival drug gangs,

a bishop revenging the death of his parents, terrorists from Miranda, the death of soldiers and policemen and, repeated three times, a scene where the group walks aimlessy and silently down a country road (cf. Catlett 47; Kinder 16).[12] In its rapid shifts between the seemingly harmless desire to dine together and a disruptive political discourse emphasizing the corruption and arrogance of the ruling classes, *Le Charme Discret de la Bourgeoisie* creates an altogether bleak portrait of bourgeois decadence.

Robert Altman's more light-hearted, if equally unsettling, *A Wedding* from 1978 was his twelfth film, even though he had successfully 'broken' into feature film direction only in 1969. Coming after *Nashville, Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976), and *Three Women*, the film continued to develop the multi-layered narration, not in the least—and in the typically excessive Altmanesque fashion to which I will return in the conclusion—by increasing *Nashville*'s number of principle characters from 24 to 48. The film brought together actors from Altman's 'mini-studio,' European cinema, American television, and the classical (silent) Hollywood period—among them Nina van Pallandt, Geraldine Chaplin, Carol Burnett, Mia Farrow, Pat McCormick, Vittorio Gassman and Lillian Gish.[13] It depicts the wedding of Dino Corelli (Desi Arnaz, Jr.) and Muffin Brenner (Amy Stryker), who come from Italian-American and Irish-American family backgrounds. Beginning with the wedding ceremony it goes on to show how the ethnic tensions underlying this union build up and escalate in numerous subplots revolving around matters of sexuality, religion, violence, and death.[14] Ethnicity, gender, and the body thus become crucial categories for the satirical depiction that the film develops via its multi-layered narration.[15]

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[12] This aimless walk, which ends the film, is a prime example of art cinema narration. It is not causally linked with the dinner party theme and thus characterized by a high degree of indeterminacy: It could be a dream, a memory or a foreshadowing, yet it could also be understood as a meta-fictional commentary representing the (general) lack of direction characteristic of the group. Victor Fuentes has identified other postmodern narrative strategies in the film, among them randomness, heterotopia, eclecticism, intertextuality, and quotation. He understands the overall structure to resemble "a series of Chinese boxes. The primary diegesis of the action, the desire of the bourgeois group to dine together, is constantly interrupted by actions that suppress the diegetic premise and redirect our attention to the framework of representations" (91).

[13] On production details concerning the script writing process and making of the film, cf. McGilligan 457-66.

[14] As Robin Wood points out, Altman's storylines are often characterized by the lack and increasing loss of control (26-45). This is also true of *A Wedding*: Nettie Sloan (Lillian Gish), grandmother of the groom and matriarchal presence hovering over the estate, dies just as the wedding ceremony is completed. The attempt to keep her death secret is increasingly shown to fail. In a related sense, on the Brenner side it is revealed that the bride's mysterious sister Buffy (Mia Farrow) is pregnant, claiming that Dino is the father. Finally, the lack of control is also a very prominent feature of Rita Billingsley (Geraldine Chaplin), who is responsible for the proper course of the wedding celebration yet finds her recurrent attempts at creating a sense of order subverted.

[15] The viciousness of the film's humor, which mixes elements of slapstick, prankish gags, satire, and ridicule (e.g. of older people and sexual deviation), led to an ambiguous critical reaction that, in retrospect, appears to be somewhat exaggerated. Writing in the 1970s, Robin Wood observed that *A Wedding* "is, in its smug superiority to and contempt for its characters and in

With regard to the comic modes, *Le Charme Discret de la Bourgeoisie* and *A Wedding* share a number of striking similarities. Both films are centered around cultural rituals, which they then proceed to dismantle with comic means. In Buñuel's case it is the refined and cultivated dinner of bourgeois society, in Altman's case an ostentatious and elaborate wedding celebration. Buñuel's film creates a circular structure. It revolves around the repetition and variation of a basic situation: the "frustrated dinner party" (Catlett 47). Altman's film, on the other hand, creates a relational structure. By continuously intercutting between its numerous characters and actions it builds up analogies and parallels.

In both instances, the ritual metonymically serves to signify the power of social and cultural elites at large so that its deconstruction is meant as a general attack on social institutions. What is significant about the refined dinner and the wedding celebration thus also applies to the church, the military, the police or the family: As institutions they are all marked by a discrepancy between appearance and reality, which opens up the possibility of exposing them satirically.

For example, the bishop conducting the ceremony in *A Wedding* is so absent-minded and senile that the exact wording of the ceremony has to be prompted, while a platoon of the French army in *Le Charme Discret de la Bourgeoisie* relaxes by smoking marijuana. Dignified rituals and social norms of behavior are undermined by the ridiculousness of the characters, self-contradictory actions, or the revelation of hypocritical double-standards. Usually it is the younger generation which registers these discrepancies most distinctly.

While Buñuel's humor thrives on the principle of repetition and the continuous failure of having dinner, Altman, as indicated, develops his comic juxtapositions through overlapping and parallel storylines that create revealing and amusing analogies among the members of the wedding celebration—after the ceremony they all begin to look for the bathroom only to find it overcrowded, while the sexual desire created by the atmosphere of celebration not only affects the young generation but also older people who subsequently begin to act in an (embarrassingly) adolescent fashion. What both auteurs share is the underlying notion that the hypocritical façade of society's institutions will eventually be unmasked by the ridiculousness or decadence of its ritualized forms of interaction.

The depiction of this ridiculousness is characterized by the aggressive hostility of the tendentious joke and furthermore by the ubiquity of military violence and terrorism. All of Buñuel's late films are ruptured by assassinations, explosions, and violent attacks, which, due to their logic of creating a state of public shock, serve as an ambiguous model for a provocative aesthetic of shock-effects. While the (fictional) terrorist attacks rupture the political sphere by literally exploding and destablizing the sense of the ordinary, Buñuel's films equally employ an aesthetic of sudden interruptions and surprises—the dead man in a restaurant, the bishop shooting a dying man (who, many years ago, had killed his parents) after giving him absolution, the ambassador killing the colonel in one of the numer-

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its unquestioning assumption of the audience's complicity, one of Altman's most unwatchable and embarrassing films" (43). Wood's notion that Altman's œuvre is highly uneven, however, appears to be shared by many critics.

ous dreams, indeed, the rupturing of the narrative by frequent awakenings from dreams (cf. Rosenbaum). Violence can create comic incongruities (as with the ambassador shooting a toy dog), yet in *Le Charme Discret de la Bourgeoisie* it is primarily a structural feature of the ruling classes—not just in the fictive Miranda but also in the complicit 'civilized West'—and thus a crucial element of Buñuel's radical political critique. In this politicized sense, the linkage of violence and the comic is more relevant for Buñuel's late period than Altman's films of the 1970s, which indicates that apart from the numerous similarities there are also significant differences in their work amounting, as I want to suggest, to two different modes of comic deconstruction.

The crucial difference lies in the fictional modeling of society: Buñuel depicts a strictly hierarchical society in which social roles are clearly defined by the respective position within the hierarchical order. Altman, on the other hand, develops the notion of a society which is characterized by vertical and horizontal mobility. Social roles appear to be more variable, and, most importantly, they are defined in the continuous and unpredictable process of interaction. While Buñuel's social space is predetermined by the hierarchy of social classes upholding a system of master and servant, Altman's space evolves out of immediate and, in principle, more open forms of interaction. Put simply, and echoing Alexis de Tocqueville's classic analysis, a late-aristocratic notion of society as a hierarchical chain of subservient subjects is contrasted with a model of (presumptive) democratic egalitarianism. In both social spaces of action the generational conflict of the post-1968-era creates a profound sense of crisis, yet this crisis takes on a specific character which helps to identify how and why the comic modes differ.

Two examples from the films may help to illustrate this difference. In *Le Charme Discret de la Bourgeoisie* the attempt to sit down for dinner has been frustrated a number of times. Once more, the guests arrive for another try and the hosts announce that they will soon join them. But suddenly they are overpowered by sexual desire. They undress, climb out of a window and, watched by one of the maids, disappear behind a bush in the garden. After waiting for some time, the guests depart, again without having eaten together.

In *A Wedding* many guests have declined the invitation, most likely because the bond between an Irish and an Italian family does not find general approval. As the hosts stand in line to greet the guests personally, it becomes evident that their number is embarrassingly small. Finally, in order to avoid the awkwardness of the situation, not just the guests but also the security guards and other people, who were not on the guest list, are invited to walk past the hosts.

Both scenes achieve their comic effect by unmasking aspects of a hollow façade. In Buñuel's case, the convention of a refined and formal dinner is thwarted by the sudden eruption of sexual urges. In Altman's case, the characters appear to be ridiculous because they believe to fit into a role (the hosts of a dignified wedding celebration) without realizing that their authority has already been critically undermined.[16] It is crucial, however, to notice the specificity of the comic effects

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[16] This notion of undermining authority is also crucial for two other elements in the film. First, Nettie's oldest daughter, presumably the new head of the family, hears last about the death

resulting from the different understanding of 'façade.' Buñuel has his characters act in a strictly hierarchical system, and thus connects the façade with the habitus of class. When his characters are surprised and overpowered by their libidinous urges, their loss of self-control is amusing primarily because it is set against the rigidity and oppressiveness of norms which associate impulsiveness and a lack of culture with the lower classes—e.g. the chauffeur who does not know how to drink a Martini. In contrast, Altman's potentially more flexible and dynamic space of action does not so much relate the notion of façade to the rigidity of the class system but to the fragility and incoherence of social roles. Altman's characters seem to have lost the stabilizing function of social conventions because the (putatively democratic) consensus about their definition has been undermined. Put differently, the crisis of the community has destabilized the structural frame necessary to define the subject interactionally, and the group loses its cohesion from within.

Buñuel's comic deconstruction thus targets the overpowering force of class-specific codes of behavior, which suppress the freedom of the individual. Altman, on the other hand, shifts the focus to the inadequacy of forms of behavior, which are no longer anchored in generally accepted—and appreciated—norms. In short, Buñuel depicts a crisis of the subject, Altman a crisis of group interaction. Correspondingly, with Buñuel the central comic principle is the sudden inversion of structural relationships. The more hierarchical the social space is presented, the more attractive appear sudden instances of reversal which are generated not just by acts of terrorism but by surrealistic shock effects. In Altman's case, the core comic strategy is mocking and ridiculing human forms of behavior. Dignitaries as targets of tendentious jokes are not ridiculed because they represent a rigid class structure but because they lack the charisma of a collectively accepted, individual authority. Buñuel's characters, then, appear to be heteronomous and thus comical because of their suppressed bodily desires, Altman's characters have lost the normative framework defining the sense of the individual self. With Buñuel the subject is transformed into the object of its desires, with Altman it becomes the object of a chaotic and destabilized community.

These differences, I would argue, are characteristic not just of Buñuel's and Altman's films, they allow us to make more general observations about the European and American art cinema in the 1970s. In Buñuel's vision the desire of the unconscious is suppressed by the dominant culture. His work underscores the longing for authenticity by means of a radically ruptured aesthetic: Dreams, memories, allegorical scenes, comic reversals—all of these elements give expression to the unconscious and seem to be making a plea for the liberation of the subject and the victory of the imagination (cf. Fuentes 89).

Altman, who does not seem to share the emphatic belief in the liberation of the subject, shifts the emphasis from the individual to the group. In his space of

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of her mother and is unaware that she is breaking the news to already informed family members. Second, Buffy, whose characterization appears to be more allegorical than realistic, is the most obvious countercultural provocation of traditional notions of patriarchal authority. Since she is expecting a child from the groom (or so she says), she undermines not only his standing but also the honor of her own family.

action, a sense of individuality can only evolve if the characters act according to rules of behavior that have been defined with the approval of a larger group. Thus these forms of behavior are less authentic than communally 'authenticated,' i.e. valorized as an expression where implicit norm and explicit behavior are realized in a convincing way. Altman's counter-image, then, does not emphasize so much the idea of liberation but a search for new codes of behavior which can be formed, acted out, and developed in the process of searching. In other words, against the pathos of liberation Altman pits the principle of improvisation.[17]

This brings me back to the question of how the comic and the improvisational elements are related in Altman's work. While Buñuel's comic deconstruction seems to have been predicated on the subversion and reversal of the class system, Altman stresses a performative quality of interaction which may be used to deconstruct codes but also to redefine and reshape them according to the needs of the community. In the 1970s, Altman was thus experimenting with an aesthetic form that seemed to grow out of the requirements of a democratic culture in a state of crisis, attempting to create a more egalitarian space of action which would draw its codes of behavior not from an external and hierarchical frame of reference (or its inversion) but, by means of interaction and struggle, from within the group. Shifting the generational conflict from rebellion to role-playing, from the liberation of suppressed desires to performative acts of self-dramatization, Altman—and the American art cinema in general—thus formulated an alternative model of comic deconstruction that translated the struggle over cultural conventions into a new relational and improvisational film aesthetic, making the search for more egalitarian forms of interaction not a utopian aspiration, but rather an experience with an immediate transformational power.

5. Conclusion

In an early assessment of Robert Altman's work, Robin Wood observes that his "best films are hybrids, products of a fusion of 'European' aspirations with American genres" (33). The notion of hybridity may seem an elegant way out of the impasse of having to claim Altman for either the European art cinema or the fringes of American cinema. His long career is a prime example how not just in terms of style and narration but also concerning film production the New Hollywood Cinema was involved in a process of transcultural cross-fertilization, for which (incidentally just as in Buñuel's case) a postnational approach seems to

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[17] In *A Wedding* this aspect of improvisation is most relevant, albeit with ambiguous implications, in the numerous conversations. Many conversations in the film take on the character of (dramatic) monologues, i.e. they are addressed to someone but, in their rambling way, appear to be a search for meaning rather than the communication of a message. Indeed, numerous scenes show how conversations take place where the speaker does not realize that the listener is in fact dead. This comic twist shows the double-edged quality of improvisation: The aimless search for meaning in conversations is a symptom of the incapability of communication yet also an indication of a comparatively open space which may be developed according to the spontaneous impulses of the speaker.

be most appropriate. Transatlantic hybridity in Altman's work can be found at the level of intertextual references, acting styles, settings, or themes but also in the frequent (and frequently funny) encounters of Americans in Europe or vice versa—the BBC reporter in *Nashville* (1975), the lovers in *Prêt-à-Porter* (1994), or the American producer in *Gosford Park* (2001).

And yet, as I have argued, there also seems to be a genuinely American quality to his work which is connected with the specificity of his democratized fictional spaces. In order to reevaluate the uniqueness of Robert Altman's contribution to American cinema, then, three elements can be seen to support the notion of a democratic aesthetic: first, a dehierarchized mode of narration which disrupts the linearity of traditional narratives and shifts the focus from heroic individuals to groups and their styles of interaction; second, comic forms of deconstruction that, in an egalitarian spirit, serve as (more or less) hostile ways of criticizing the abuse of power, racism or injustice; finally, the creative energy of improvisation.

However, it would be misleading to suggest that the American art cinema as represented by Altman was involved in an unambiguous process of democratization. In his perceptive analysis of the late 1980s, Robert Kolker remarked that in his estimation the filmmaker was trapped in an ideology of winning and losing: "He found a point of escape out of the dead hand of Hollywood filmmaking, but could not go beyond visions of the closed, oppressive society that his liberated language addressed" (381). Films like *The Player*, *Short Cuts*, or *Prêt-à-Porter*, which followed in the 1990s, certainly bear Kolker's judgment out.[18] Not only did they continue to present the notion of winning and losing—i.e. the ritualized and destructive logic of playing games—as an ambiguous metaphor for the workings of the 'closed, oppressive society,' they also went on to symbolically 'shoot back' by means of irony and ridicule.[19]

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[18] On Altman's crucial 'comeback' film *The Player*, cf. Self 215-43 and Decker, "Spiel."

[19] At the textual microlevel, however, one could argue that important changes can indeed be noticed in Altman's late work—particularly concerning the search for individual freedom, which is a core 'democratic' theme in his films that has continuously been treated by negation in his work, particularly in the motif of suicide. To be sure, the connection between suicide and freedom is complicated. Usually the theme denotes a feeling of lack and desperation—it is a prime example of an 'escapist' solution to the experience of suffering. Yet the treatment of suicide changed significantly in Altman's films and this change is also instructive for the consideration of his democratic aesthetic. In the early 1970s the depiction of suicide lacks the emotional intensity of individual suffering and desperation. It is seen to be a futile and impotent choice for asserting one's independence, indeed, the idea of suicide as freedom is ridiculed as an illusion (e.g. in the theme song's lyrics of *M*A*S*H*: "Suicide is painless, it brings on many changes, and I can take or leave it if I please"). With *Short Cuts* (1993) and *Cookie's Fortune* (1999), the theme of suicide is reframed. It is presented as a deliberate and autonomous choice, not just an impotent form of escape. Especially with regard to the character of Cookie Orcutt, suicide as a wilful act appears to be a sign of autonomy and maturity. Cookie's action is neither ridiculed nor morally condemned, it is, in fact, mourned. This film, then, seems to indicate an 'affective turn' within Altman's œuvre. It creates and maintains an emotional appeal that is not immediately cancelled out. The simple and understated yet touching way of presenting the act of ending one's life suggests that Altman had finally come around to saying that suicide is everything but painless.

But perhaps the most relevant internal threat to the project of democratization in Altman's films was a principle that may equally be regarded as specifically 'American.'[20] As the anecdote about increasing the number of characters in *A Wedding* from 24 to 48 suggests, at the heart of Altman's work lies a notion of *excess* that influences not only his narrative patterns but also his visual style and the larger implications of his work.

To be sure, the interrogation of excess followed from the New Hollywood Cinema's schizophrenic relationship with classical Hollywood which it repudiated but to which it was also inextricably bound (cf. Elsaesser 58-62). An excessive amount of visual and narrative information was a way of reflecting on and a reworking of Hollywood's equally excessive cultivation of specifically 'American' production values like star appeal, elaborateness of sets, or spectacular quality of performance. Excess was thus a primary characteristic of a stylistic universe that Richard Maltby has called Hollywood's commercial aesthetic.[21]

In Altman's case, however, the logic of excess, re-negotiated in so many of his films, runs the risk of working against two aspirations that I have identified as belonging to the process of democratization. On the one hand, an excessive amount of information may overwhelm the sense of multiplicity and diversity of points of view leaving nothing but the impression of arbitrariness. On the other, the liberating aspect of performative self-creation may equally be threatened by excessive ways of analogical mirroring and interrelation. In the overabundance of their juxtapositions the different forms of behavior may tend to cancel each other out risking that the crucial points of struggle and performative resistance get lost in a chaotic space of action. And yet, if we can conclude that, in an aesthetic and political sense, Altman's films are reflections on as well as symptoms of the notion that the commercial logic of excess may overpower the aspirations and needs of a democratic culture, then his uniqueness lies not the least in having put this cultural dynamic of struggle, unsparingly and with all its disturbing implications, at the heart of his work.

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[20] Thanks to Gilles Ménélgado for his helpful remarks on this point.

[21] The notion of excess was also, of course, a major element of the realism vs. melodrama-debates in the 1970s. Yet, again, in the context of the New Hollywood Cinema, Altman's basic reliance on comic modes gives his particular engagement with forms of excess a distinct and rather different quality.

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