

Insanity: robert altman's mash



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“ In a mad world, only the mad are sane.” Akira Kurosawa “ What this picture is about — and it keeps getting more clear to me all the time — is the insanity.” Robert Altman MASH was not Richard Nixon’s favorite war film of 1970. Of the four highest grossing war films released domestically in 1970 at the height of the Vietnam War — Paramount’s satirical Catch-22 and Fox’s trio of MASH and the more conventional Tora! Tora! Tora! and Patton — the recently-minted war president’s personal favorite was by far Franklin Schaffner’s biopic of World War II general and fellow Californian George S. Patton. Mark Feeney, in *Nixon at the Movies*, suggests that Patton, with his “ macho, swaggering, impulsive” qualities, was a “ Nixonian beau ideal: an example to aspire to, even if not a model to live by.” A large cohort of America, of course, had a different pick. The low budget subversive antiwar comedy MASH, which “ Fox thought would just play in drive-ins,” grossed an astonishing \$36.7 million that year — just over \$200 million in 2008 dollars — and came in as the third highest grossing film of 1970, just behind *Love Story* and *Airport*. The vaunted studio pictures *Patton* and *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, both made with budgets which dwarfed that of MASH, pulled more meager returns: in contrast to Fox’s unexpected 13x return on their \$3.5 million MASH investment, the President’s favorite flick, while still successful as the fourth highest grossing film of the year, returned somewhat more than twice what the studio put into it; *Tora! Tora! Tora!* was an unmitigated flop. Meanwhile, *Catch-22*, that other subversive antimilitary war comedy released in 1970 — the one with the bigger cast, the bigger budget, the more prominent source novel, and the established director who had achieved counterculture cinema success — was as well a flop, barely pulling in as much as its budget. Robert Altman, commenting in 2004 on the MASH-

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Catch-22 affair with classic braggadocio, remarked, " It didn't surprise me, because I thought that was the way it should be... I even had a sign up in my office: We've Caught 22!" Patton, with its curious relationship to the apparently masculinity-obsessed Nixon , offers an interesting vantage point from which to begin contemplating MASH. Compared to MASH, Patton was a more conventional studio film, one which received much more attention from studio executives than Altman's " under-the-radar" production. In fact, Altman reported that after studio executives had seen the grittiness of the dailies for MASH, they began to insist to Patton's director Frank Schaffner, " This doesn't look dirty or real enough!" Moreover, MASH was a starkly vulgar post-Hays black comedy, one which featured a previously unheard of level of irreverent depictions and discussions of nudity, drug use, surgery, adultery, profanity, sexuality, and homosexuality. Patton, meanwhile, included no very salacious content to speak of, receiving a PG rating. In contrast to MASH's inclusion of the word " fuck" — the first non-X-rated domestic studio film to have the honor of doing so — Patton's opening monologue features some bowdlerized dialogue, in which the word " fornicating" awkwardly rears its head. Feeney argues that Patton, like MASH, featured a somewhat subversive bent towards war and authority, thus rendering that militarist authoritarian Nixon's love of the film deeply ironic. He writes that Patton offered something to both hawks and doves, and that the character of George Patton, pitched as a rebel and a rule-breaker, " hated authority as much as the longhairs did — more actually, since those in charge stood in the way of his being final authority." In comparing Patton and MASH directly, Feeney states: With something for everyone in the audience, Patton was part of an even larger balancing act, belligerent yin to the irreverent yang of

another wildly popular war picture also released that year by Fox, M*A*S*H. The irony is that Scott's Patton makes Elliott Gould's Trapper John and Donald Sutherland's Hawkeye seem models of restraint by comparison. Is this really the case? Were these binge-drinking, womanizing, openly insubordinate draftee surgeons really models of restraint in contrast to the decorated general, either in fiction or in reality? Was Patton's vaguely rebellious stance towards military bureaucracy at all comparable to MASH's open loathing for militarism and the social functions which support it? Perhaps if it were a matter of historical record that George S. Patton had conspired to sexually humiliate a female Major multiple times or had ever blackmailed a Colonel by drugging him and photographing him unclothed with a prostitute, Feeney's broad comparison would make a better argument (unfortunately, we can only speculate). Perhaps in the course of this discussion it is unfair to continuing harping on one author's offhand comparison. It is, however, quite salient that the broad and profoundly subversive moral stances of MASH and its doctor heroes — positions which fly in opposition to social mores, to faith, to patriotism, to militarism — render the film an incomparably more potent rebellion against authority than Patton. Patton, despite Feeney's suggestion of the film holding anti-authority overtones, was at its heart a sanitary, patriotic war film — one you go see with either your mother or your president. It was a film whose hero seemed at times contemplative of the senseless violence of warfare, yet nevertheless declared while watching a gruesome battle unfold, " God help me, I do love it so." What follows is neither a longer comparison between MASH and Patton nor a longer discourse on the 37th President's taste in cinema. Instead, what follows is a focused excursion into the starkly rebellious nature of MASH, and <https://assignbuster.com/insanity-robert-altmans-mash/>

a dissertation about the complex social relationships among faith, sexuality, militarism, social order, art, and culture suggested by this film. The ironies and contradictions of MASH — a film about war without war, a comedy that capitalizes on tragedy, a mobile army hospital that never moves, and a fiction of violence repeated nearly verbatim on the nightly news both then and now — are reflective of the bitter ironies of 1960s America as viewed by Robert Altman and his crew. I submit that the proper lens for viewing America's long engagement in Vietnam is not through the binoculars of the general so admired by the president, but instead through Altman's steady zoom: focusing, yet destabilizing; inviting intimacy, yet constantly reminding one of a profound distance.***The rudiments of MASH came from the firsthand experiences of H. Richard Hornberger, a Cornell Medical School graduate whose service with the 8055th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital unit in Korea provided the background for his darkly comic 1968 work MASH: A Novel about Three Army Doctors. Here, Hornberger, whose work was published under the pen name "Richard Hooker," sketched most of the characters and episodes which would find their way into Altman's film: the torment of Frank Burns, Trapper and Hawkeye's Japan excursion, the Painless Pole's "Last Supper," Ho-Jon's conscription, the football game, etc. In 1969 the galleys for Hornberger's novel ended up in the hands of Ring Lardner, Jr. Lardner, who in the 1940s had been a successful Oscar-winning screenwriter and unabashed leftist, wound up one of the Hollywood Ten. Convicted of contempt of Congress and consequently blacklisted, Lardner went fifteen years between screen credits until receiving acknowledgement for his work on The Cincinnati Kid in 1965. Lardner sent a copy of the script to Ingo Preminger, director Otto Preminger's brother, who then had a

producing deal with Fox Studios. Preminger and Lardner successfully pitched the film to Richard Zanuck and David Brown, heads of Fox production.

Lardner wrote the script, and the duo proceeded to find a suitable director.

Preminger and Lardner looked for young directorial talent who would be capable of “properly” handling the film’s controversial subject matter and language, and as well would be able to attract star actors. While the script was received warmly by a number of those contacted, some fifteen potential directors turned the project down. Mike Nichols, Arthur Penn, and Stanley Kubrick were busy with *Catch-22*, *Little Big Man*, and *A Clockwork Orange* respectively; Franklin Schaffner was of course busy with *Patton*; George Roy Hill and Paul Newman were working on *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*; Bob Rafelson was busy filming *Five Easy Pieces*; Sidney Lumet as well said no. It was only when, by some bit of chance, an idiosyncratic 44-year-old TV director and WWII veteran whose only experience directing a real studio film had ended in turmoil found himself with a copy of the script and the time to film it that the MASH team found its leader.***Robert Bernard Altman was

born on July 20, 1925 into a well-to-do Kansas City family. While surrounded by the despair of the Great Depression, Altman’s family nevertheless maintained their suburban affluence in a prosperous area of town. Raised a Catholic, the young Altman was a regular churchgoer who constantly tried to duck out of Sunday Mass: “My mother kept saying, ‘Oh, Bobby, when you get into the war, you’ll need to turn to your religion.’ And when I got into the army, that was the last year I went to church in my life.” Altman left public school during his junior year to join the Wentworth Military Academy, where he achieved a junior college degree. In 1945, at the age of nineteen, Altman quit pursuing higher education and enlisted in the Air Force with the dream

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of becoming a fighter pilot. Altman underwent training in Riverside, California, where the teenager developed a fascination with Hollywood society. In March of 1945, Altman with his fellow crew members flew to the island of Morotai in the Dutch East Indies, where they spent the remainder of the war engaged in bombing missions over the Southern Philippines with the aim of clearing out remaining Japanese installations. Altman's behavior during the war may have included hints towards his future attitudes towards film directing, especially with respect to his conviviality, his sense of equality, his resistance to studio authority, and his collaborative manner of operation. McGilligan describes the young officer's attitude as "cavalier," and suggests this attitude "is carried over into the skepticism and cynicism of the film and television work that dissects the military code." Moreover, Altman "preferred to fraternize with the enlisted men. He would remove his insignia in order to visit the island's NCO facility, which had the added attraction of Aussie enlisted women." Contrast this impulse with Altman's declaration, regarding the casting of MASH, that "I went through the script and gave names to all these characters I wanted and put one or two lines in for each of them... I'd done this in television before, when I would give six people one line each in order to have extras whom I could talk to." (Thompson explains via endnote that "Normally, only an assistant director can address extras on a movie set.") Moreover, Altman's propensity for drinking and socialization during the period of downtime he enjoyed during the war seems to link up with the director's management style, particularly with respect to MASH. McGilligan mentions the "night-long beach parties with the nurses from the Australian hospital unit," the "awesome poker games," and the "plenty of booze and cigarettes and socialization": "In the end, the partylike MASH

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may be the most autobiographical of his combat zone depictions.” This certainly jibes with the leisurely, convivial atmosphere among Altman and his actors during the filming of MASH: “[A]t nightly get-togethers, everybody got ‘squiffed’ and made egalitarian comments about the rushes,” writes McGilligan. Regarding the film’s production, AMC’s Backstory reports, “the actors started bunking down in tents around the set, and inhibitions began running wild.” Tom Skeritt, the actor who plays Duke in the film, said in an interview for Backstory, “It was a very crazy camp, it was a very mad set. Robert Altman allowed us to be foolish and carry on.” Altman’s career in the entertainment industry began when he learned filmmaking at the Calvin Company in Kansas City. Here, the incipient director created his first works: mainly industrial films for Calvin, but also some unsuccessful local features, such as 1956’s *The Delinquents*, a teen exploitation film imitative of *Blackboard Jungle*, which was nonetheless a modest success. It was at this time that Altman went to Hollywood, where Alfred Hitchcock, impressed by *The Delinquents*, tapped the 31-year-old to direct two episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Altman thus began a decade-long TV career, which included episodes of action shows such as *Combat!*, *Bonanza*, and *The Whirlybirds*, a “bottom-of-the-barrel” TV series described by TV Guide as “A Western with helicopters.” Altman’s TV career was marked both by frequent sparring with TV executives over his unconventional style and by his pursuit of creative autonomy, which he described as auteurism. Altman’s TV experience, particularly with respect to the low-rent *Whirlybirds*, taught him a lesson which he would later utilize in the filming of MASH: that working on a project with a low budget and low studio interest offered an intensioned director a great deal of autonomy. It was during Altman’s TV career that he

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met agent George Litto, who for a time provided representation for the upstart director. Litto had a very cavalier, antiauthority attitude of his own, taking on controversial clients such as the blacklisted Lardner. Altman directed two features before MASH: the 1968 Warner Brothers space race film Countdown, the ending of which was changed by studio executives, and the 1969 independent feature That Cold Day in the Park, a surreal sexual thriller which Altman considered to be his "first" true film because of the level of directorial control which he exerted over it. By 1969, Altman had been working for five years on a World War I flying film, The Chicken and the Hawk, which Altman says never progressed very far in the production process due to his lack of credentials and the expense required in making the film. It was at this time that Altman received a copy of Lardner's MASH script through Litto, read it, and loved it. Altman was, however, not exactly in the running for director. Yet Litto recognized what a great fit Altman was for the feature: "The same unorthodox line, the caustic, biting, sardonic humor, outrageous humor, black comedy. I knew Bob understood this, liked this and wanted to do this." As the rejections from potential directors piled up, Litto proceeded to screen for Lardner and Preminger That Cold Day in the Park to illustrate Altman's "talent and art" capacities, as well as some of Altman's earlier comic shorts to show off Altman's "wild sense of humor." After one meeting, Altman was brought on board. Fox, while dubious about Altman's directorial capacities, was willing to accept the decision, albeit at a severe pay cut. Litto's original package for Altman — a salary of \$100,000 and 5 per cent of the film's profits — was cut to \$75,000 and zero points. Litto told Altman, "They don't want you. If you tell them you don't accept the deal, they'll be the happiest studio in town today. You really want to fuck them?"

Take the deal." He did. Regarding Altman's lack of bargaining power, Preminger remarked decades later in an interview for *Enlisted: The Story of MASH*, " I had a director who was not able to give me any conditions, because he was the one whom I hired, and he was like a pussycat. I'm sure he'll never again be as nice and pliable as he was with me." ***In reality, Altman wasn't quite as pliable as Preminger suggests with respect to the casting of the film. Before Altman signed on, Preminger cast Donald Sutherland, an out-of-work actor who had appeared in *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), as surgeon Hawkeye Pierce, one of the three main roles of the film. When Altman came aboard, he first tried to get Sutherland fired; later, he tried to reduce Sutherland's billing. Preminger also brought in Elliott Gould, who had received an Oscar nomination for his role in the hit counterculture film *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*. Gould was originally slated to play " Duke" Forrest, Hawkeye's womanizing friend, but the actor had misgivings about affecting a Southern accent; he received the ultimately larger part of " Trapper John" McIntyre, the third subversive surgeon. The role of Duke was filled by Tom Skerritt, who had appeared in a television pilot directed by Altman and considered him a mentor during the 60s. Rounding out the starring cast: Sally Kellerman, who initially wanted the role of Lt. Dish, was instead given the bigger role of " Hot Lips" O'Houlihan , the chief nurse, after one meeting with Altman; Robert Duvall, who had played Boo Radley in *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1962) and was one of the bigger names on the set, played the hypocritical zealot Frank Burns; Roger Bowen, an unknown actor, played the camp's commanding officer Henry Blake; Rene Auberjonois, who had had some experience in theater but was as well an unknown, played the camp chaplain, Father Mulcahy; and David Arkin, who initially had a limited

role as Sgt. Vollmer, became one of the most pivotal voices in the film — that of the camp's ubiquitous P. A. system. One of the more interesting aspects of the actual credits of MASH is the long list of actors billed with "introducing": JoAnn Pflug (Lt. Dish), Gary Burghoff (Radar O'Reilly), John Schuck ("Painless Pole," the well-endowed dentist), Bud Cort (the baby-faced Pvt. Boone), Kim Atwood (Ho-Jon, the houseboy), Timothy Brown (the anesthesiologist "Me Lay" Marston), and pro footballer Michael Murphy ("Spearchucker" Jones). In all, "fourteen of the twenty-eight speaking roles belonged to actors to actors making their motion-picture debuts." This glut of fresh faces and small roles was no accident. As stated earlier, Altman had a propensity for larger casts, and he used the opportunity provided by MASH to expand upon this tendency first exhibited, albeit in a limited fashion, during his television career. "I went up to San Francisco, where there was a lot of Theater of the Absurd going on and you could see twenty-five people interacting on stage. I hired about twenty actors for MASH, many of whom had never been in a movie before... So I went through the script and gave names to all these characters I wanted and put one or two lines in for each of them." Moreover, the film's limited budget necessitated the use of unknowns and lesser-knowns. In the filming of MASH, Altman gave very limited direction to his actors. "I don't understand acting, by which I mean I don't understand how they do it... Burt Lancaster in Buffalo Bill said afterwards, 'Altman didn't give me any directions.' ... That's not what I do. I try to create an atmosphere where these actors can stretch into it." The free-flowing nature of the MASH production — on a set in remote Malibu Creek State Park where actors not involved in the scene at hand would "play touch football, poker, one o' cat, wade in the stream, and pick wildflowers" — allowed for a great deal of

spontaneity and improvisation on the part of the actors. Some of the film's more memorable moments — such as Father Mulcahy blessing a jeep and the Painless Pole telling the opposing player (played by a very real, and very large pro football player) in the scrimmage line “ your fuckin’ head is coming right off” — were invented on the fly during filming. Altman so delighted in these inventions that he later fought successfully to have the historic profanity included in the film's final cut. For his part, Altman himself invented the Last Supper tableau and came up with the idea of Radar talking over Col. Blake's lines very spontaneously on the set. The egalitarian atmosphere of the set and Altman's lack of direction caused difficulties for the film's two biggest names, Sutherland and Gould. The duo, fed up with Altman, unsuccessfully tried to have him fired. The drama threatened to sink MASH's tiny, unorthodox production, which Altman was attempting to “ sneak through” past Fox executives more concerned with big budget pictures Patton and Tora! Tora! Tora! contemporaneously being filmed. Ultimately, Litto and Preminger successfully secured peace on the set. Gould later remarked on the affair: “ It was like Bob had his whole family together — except for me and Donald, who were separate. He was hurt and offended, which I didn't understand.” After finding out about the attempted coup from Gould some time after the production, Altman said that if he had known, he would have quit. Such was Altman's creative respect for the actors he didn't quite understand. In the editing process, Altman made a number of important decisions that ultimately influenced the film's unique comic pacing. It was in the editing studio that Altman meticulously shuffled the film's sound, composing MASH's unique overlapping dialogue and balance of non-diegetic sound. The film's fast-paced humor is partially a result of

Altman's insertion of quick cuts in the middle of lines of dialogue, usually the reactions of comic straight men — essentially, dead weight. Notably, Altman added a loudspeaker because he felt the film needed something for segues. It was out of this freewheeling, isolated little world in hilly Southern California that Altman and his crew together put MASH together, on schedule and under budget. From this novel and rather slapdash production process — involving the creative minds of over two dozen people, a lineage traveling from Hornberger to Lardner to Altman to his actors, then back to Altman — emanated this wildly successful and influential wartime attack on a plethora of American social, cultural, and political values.***Structurally, MASH is a series of vignettes centered on the experiences of Capt. Hawkeye Pierce in the 4077th MASH unit in Korea. The inciting incident of the film is Pierce's arrival; the film ends with his departure. Yet there is exists, at face value, no conventional plotline which unifies the events depicted in the film. Pierce, with his surgeon friends "Trapper John" McIntyre and "Duke" Forrest (both of whom also arrive and depart within the scope of the film), engage in an aimless series of disparate "zany antics" incited by external events (such as Trapper John's orders to go to Japan) or their own capacity for mischief (such as when the gang conspires to have Hot Lips, the uptight head nurse, humiliated in the shower). There is simply no overarching, unifying plot to MASH: the audience is simply given bits and pieces of a broader story of these doctors attempting to maintain their sanity through the application of their jocular and uniquely subversive dispositions. The surgeons drink, they golf, they gamble, they prank, and somehow they find time for surgery. Then, one day, they are told that they can go home, and so they leave. In my estimation, MASH can best be divided into six distinct episodes, each more

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or less featuring its own miniature, unified plot: (1) the “ Frank Burns sequence,” in which Hawkeye, Duke, and Trapper arrive and consequently conspire to get the incompetent surgeon Maj. Burns removed; (2) the “ Painless Pole/Last Supper sequence,” in which the trio helps the camp’s suicidal dentist; (3) “ Margaret’s humiliation/Ho-Jon’s conscription,” a rather interstitial, fragmented series of events in which Hot Lips is humiliated and Hawkeye’s Korean houseboy-cum-bartender is drafted; (4) the “ Japan sequence,” where Trapper and Hawkeye go to Japan on a special assignment; (5) the “ Football sequence,” where the MASH unit conspires to win a large sum of money in a football game against the Army team; and (6) the “ end sequence,” a brief series of scenes describing the departure of cast at the war’s end. Mirroring the fragmented structure of the film, the moral and political message of MASH is itself is a broad pastiche of acute social criticism — that is, criticism of militarism, of nationalism, of faith, of bureaucracy, of greed, of racism, of repressive social mores, of hypocrisy, and of propaganda — held together by the basic relationship between each individual social aspect and war. The film’s criticism of, for instance, religion is entirely focused on the role of religion in promoting or fostering human conflict. Similarly, the film’s criticism of greed is predicated on both explicit and implicit suggestions of war profiteering (as well as Hawkeye’s subversion of the idea of petty theft as he steals a jeep for no real material benefit of his own). All of these attitudes and institutions that are targets of MASH’s satire are not merely figures of the turbulent political atmosphere of the 1960s. Instead, Altman’s social critique is a timeless one, one which exists beyond any single conflict. MASH is a film based on a book about the Korean War and modeled by a WWII veteran to attack the causes and functions of the

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ongoing Vietnam War. There are no actual references to Korea in the film, with the exception of the opening scrawl — added at the behest of studio executives who were balked at the idea of pitching a blatant or even ambiguous attack on the Vietnam War. Yet this was Altman's blatant political intention: to attack the callous attitudes of political and military leaders who blithely conduct warfare seemingly without serious concern for the casualties involved and without candor towards the public; to attack the fervid, all-consuming jingoism which conflates patriotism with unquestioning assent for military expeditions and fosters an obsession with military practices; to attack the conservative institutions of religion which implicitly supports conflict through the commingling of faith and patriotism; to attack a bloated and dysfunctional military bureaucracy, one which places the singular concept of order above all else; to attack a broad range of repressive and outmoded social mores regarding sexuality, profanity, and vice — all rendered inane in the backdrop of death and psychological turmoil on the front lines; to attack the pervasive hypocrisy of those who are guilty of propagating these institutions and social myths; and to attack media — specifically propagandistic Hollywood cinema — which serve to glamorize and otherwise misrepresent the nature of war. The three military conflicts mentioned above — as well as the relevant social politics of the 1960s — compose the antecedents and the frame of reference for MASH. Indeed, it was in the backdrop of the Vietnam War and the social upheaval of the 1960s that the film found its staggering success. Yet Altman's forward-looking political message resonates past any single conflict or any particular decade; MASH postulates basic, universal human tendencies which foster nationalistic violence. In essence, MASH is not a film about one specific

conflict, whether Vietnam or Korea; on the contrary, it is a piercing vision, rooted in the zeitgeist of 1960s society, of the institutions and social constructs which foster conflict and obfuscate the reality of war. MASH is a film which hails the social revolution of the 1960s as potential saviors of a militaristic American society riddled with corrupt institutions and speaks to a young, radically liberal generation in affirming their suspicions about the hypocrisies and the fallacies of those in charge. It is a film that visually and thematically subverts cinematic conventions in the service of subverting social conventions. And it is a film that legitimizes the faithlessness, the sexual liberation, the vice, and the profound cynicism of this new generation through the constant affirmation that the antidote to a society gone mad is insanity.***" I shall go to Korea."- Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1952 " The first priority foreign policy objective of our next Administration will be to bring an honorable end to the war in Vietnam."- Richard M. Nixon, 1968 Perhaps Richard Nixon's vague and entirely untruthful campaign promise of securing an honorable peace in Vietnam was running through when Altman's head when he chose the two quotes that scroll across the screen as Hawkeye is introduced (at the insistence of studio executives who demanded an explicit mention of Korea), one by Douglas MacArthur, the other a version of the Eisenhower quote above. Perhaps Nixon's bald-faced lie — in 1970, a few months after the release of MASH, Nixon actually extended the war into Cambodia — seemed to echo the more truthful pledge made by his erstwhile boss. In November 1952, President-elect Eisenhower indeed physically went to Korea, ultimately securing an armistice with the North Koreans just a few months into his administration — barely three years after the start of the war. By contrast, Nixon inherited a far less popular war going on its tenth

year. Besides the none-too-subtle comparison between Eisenhower and Nixon, the historicity of the quote casts an ironic light on the film. Hawkeye arrives in Korea, to work against his will in the war effort, as Eisenhower insists that he too will arrive, albeit to secure peace. It thus characterizes Hawkeye as a supporter (or perhaps harbinger) of peace and places this film about events during the Korean War in the interesting situation of being introduced with the events leading to the conflict's end. As well, the Eisenhower quote establishes the sheer transience of the film's world: temporary relationships which will end when the characters return home and a mobile encampment in a foreign land that can (and will eventually) be taken down in just a few hours' time. The pervasive transience of the film's milieu eliminates the significance of the military conflict which serves as the film's backdrop. Indeed, one of the pivotal contradictions of MASH is that it is essentially a war film without war; therefore, the film's basis entirely subverts the traditional premise of a war film. No battles are depicted in MASH despite the unceasing flow of graphic, bloody casualties into a military hospital just "three miles from the front line." Moreover, no gunshots are heard over the course of the entire film, except for the two which are fired from the referee's pistol during the football sequence. This contradiction is entirely on display during the film's opening credit sequence, in which medical helicopters float ethereally around the Korean hillside, prominently displaying the bloodied, injured soldiers they carry. The opening theme is a folk song with an upbeat melody juxtaposed with mordant lyrics and a perverse message: "Suicide is Painless." In this very first sequence, the audience is prepared for the dark, subversive tenor of the film. The juxtaposition of military wounded with a song extolling the virtues of suicide

blatantly challenges the social narrative of heroism in war and honor in dying in combat. Moreover, while helicopters as a military implement first gained widespread use during the Korean War, in 1970 they were much more reminiscent of combat in Vietnam, where the dense jungles of Southeast Asia and remoteness of villages necessitated the widespread deployment of combat helicopters. This sequence thus served as a blunt reminder of the grim, asymmetrical warfare transpiring overseas against a resilient enemy scattered across exotic terrain. Additionally, within the film, the helicopter sequence serves to establish the remoteness of the MASH unit itself, as the broad, panoramic shots of the dirty, green-hued camp surrounded by the wooded hillside place the entire film in a singular, isolated location. The distance between the war and the medical unit is another significant aspect established here; these helicopters become in the film a presence signaling the arrival of gravely wounded soldiers from an unseen and unheard conflict. For a film without any war and without any armed violence, there is certainly no paucity of casualties in MASH. The blood-soaked operating scenes are depicted with grim realism. In the production process, these scenes were set up meticulously, with pains taken to find the right hue for the blood; fruit pits and other “ things for the actors to discover” were in fact placed in the bodies being operated on in order to “ keep the shot rolling.” The injured soldiers are a ubiquitous presence in the film, and it is entirely this steady flow of wounded that motivates the doctors’ presence in Korea. Yet, notably, every one of these soldiers is presented in some comatose state. No wounded man has a single line of dialogue in the film. Moreover, their individual back-stories are totally absent from the film. The circumstances under which any casualty or group of casualties — e. g., the name of their

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unit, which battle they were wounded at, etc. — comes to the MASH are never at all addressed. These ubiquitous wounded soldiers are essentially presented entirely as props. In deemphasizing the identities of wounded soldiers, Altman works not to denigrate them, but instead to strongly suggest the irrelevance of their individual combat experiences. Altman is thus working to deglamorize and demystify warfare by boiling down the very experience of combat to its simple, mortal consequences. The attitude of the doctors towards their work is an aspect which goes hand-in-hand with this deglamorization of war. The doctors only discuss the patients in terms of their medical work, the actual function which saves lives. Moreover, they take a blasé posture regarding the identities of these wounded. When a nurse insists to Trapper regarding an individual body he's operating on, "that man is a prisoner of war," he fires back, "So are you, sweetheart, but you just don't know it." While on an explicit level this exchange makes apparent that Trapper doesn't care about the identity of the wounded man (and hence is exclusively concerned with saving the man's life), on a more subtle visual level, the way the bodies are presented give the audience no indication as to which body is on which side — thus the question becomes irrelevant, and thus the nurse's comment seems petty and misanthropic. The distinct lack of interest in the actual military effort evinced by the attitudes of the doctors is reflected by the comic dialogue of the film, which often capitalizes on platitudinal speech, obsessive behavior, and military metaphors as objects of ridicule. In one of several callback jokes, the commanding officer Col. Blake twice goes off on an absurd "speech," once in conversation with General Hammond and later as a pep talk during halftime in the football game. "Ever since the dark days before Pearl Harbor,

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I have been proud to wear this uniform..." Delivered in a dull fashion, this absurdly militaristic statement — something to which, based on Blake's past behavior, the Colonel does not actually subscribe — is the closest thing to a Patton-esque address or rallying cry in MASH. Moreover, Blake, with his penchant for fishing, is completely disconnected from the war effort, except when it affects the number of incoming casualties. Consider this exchange:

HAMMOND: I got news for you, Henry. You were so concerned about the

Battle for Old Baldy? Well, it's all over. BLAKE: That's great news, General.

Who won? The General then abruptly changes the subject, the subtext being both that Hammond would be exuberant about a battle simply being over and that Blake is only passively interested in knowing who won (perhaps his cynicism is from experience). Other instances include Hawkeye's mock-defense of Hot Lips' honor — "How dare you say that about an officer of the United States Army, sir?" — and the dialogue during Painless Pole's "Last Supper," a mock funeral held on behalf of the company dentist on the night of his planned suicide attempt: DUKE: Ol' Walt's going into the unknown, to do a little recon work for us all. HAWKEYE: Nobody ordered Walt to go on this mission. He volunteered for certain death. That is what we award our highest medals toward. That's what being a soldier is all about. Subsequently, one of the crew members sings a live rendition of "Suicide is Painless," again returning to the direct comparison of suicide (i. e. a dishonorable, sinful mode of death) with death in battle (i. e. an honorable end). The doctors' disinterest in and open mockery of things like military honors contrasts nicely with the obsessive behavior of Hot Lips, who, after being humiliated in the shower, hysterically demands that Blake punish the doctors or else she'll resign her commission. Blake, in bed with a nurse and absolutely

unconcerned, immediately calls her bluff: BLAKE: Goddamn it, Hot Lips, resign your goddamn commission. HOT LIPS: [crying] My commission! My commission! My commission! [etc.]The fanaticism over patriotism, order, faith, and success in the ranks exhibited by Hot Lips and Frank Burns is a focal point within the film in which these attitudes intersect in an entirely negative fashion. Frank exhibits an asinine, monomaniacal patriotism, one which he openly commingles with his faith. The audience is introduced to Frank as he comes out of the barber tent then actually salutes a plane flying overhead. Frank is shortly thereafter shown teaching English to his Korean houseboy Ho-Jon using the Bible as a study text. While Frank appears to be devoting his time to a positive moral pursuit, his actions carry the somewhat unsettling overtones of imperialism and undue proselytization. Frank's religious identity is later established in full, as he goes off on a comically long prayer — while Hawkeye and Duke crack wise at his expense — asking for the safety of “ our Supreme Commander in the field and our Commander-in-Chief in Washington.” Hawkeye and Duke respond by launching into a rendition of “ Onward Christian Soldiers,” which gets picked up by some camp members walking by the tent. At first, Hawkeye and Duke's insulting behavior towards Burns seems cruel. Yet the remainder of the scene offers a strong visual and aural insight into Burns' mindset. The camera cuts from the passing crew members to a close-up of Frank's anguished eyes. The audience hears the fading sound of the singing be fully drowned out by the very loud (possibly non-diegetic) sound of an overhead aircraft: as a result, Frank looks like he's having a migraine. The emotion on Frank's face is unclear from the limited shot the audience receives of his visage: fitting with Frank's character, he might be feeling embarrassment, quiet anger, or

simply indignity. But perhaps Frank also feels guilt, as that emotion is heavily suggested by this sequence of shots and sounds. The connection between faith and military zeal could not be clearer, and the camp sing-along of "Onward Christian Soldiers" feeding into the sound of a large aircraft has a profoundly haunting audio quality, exacerbated by the fact that Frank Burns' face is the audience's only visual frame of reference. The next scene's dialogue begins with a list of patients waiting for surgery, as if to suggest that these were soldiers injured in the battle involving the heavy aircraft. Compared to the "sky pilot" Frank, Father Mulcahy, the actual chaplain, is a much more positive influence. Mulcahy is a soft-spoken, kind, and eternally humble figure in the film, a person who seems genuinely put off by some of the more inappropriate antics of the doctors (e. g., broadcasting the sexual encounter between Frank and Hot Lips over the camp's P. A.) yet, unlike Frank, remains entirely friendly to them in spite of it (and in spite of his disrespectful nickname, "Dago Red"). Mulcahy is thus a sympathetic figure, though his general fecklessness in the film doesn't give him much of a strong moral voice. Mulcahy does actually go along with at least one of the doctors' schemes, fretting that he might be compromising his beliefs yet nevertheless deciding to trust the positive aims of Duke and Hawkeye: namely, in giving last rites to a man about to commit fake suicide. In another instance, Mulcahy comes to represent the general ineffectuality of religion per se as he is in the O. R. giving last rites to a dead man when Duke asks him to hold a retractor, to which Mulcahy complies. As Duke explains soberly: "I'm sorry, Dago, but this man's still alive, and that other man is dead. And that's a fact." In their singular goal of saving lives, the doctors as well overcome the bureaucratic obstacles that are omnipresent in the film. Hawkeye, upon

arriving in Korea, encounters his first difficulty when he's brusquely told by the depot manager to wait for his driver to the MASH unit: " He's having his coffee." Duke appears and assumes that Hawkeye is his driver; Hawkeye simply agrees to play along. The two steal the jeep and drive off to the mess tent at the MASH, leaving behind a scene of turmoil as the servicemen at the depot try to mobilize to chase the two down, only to end up physically fighting with each other. This early victory introduces the audience to the basic " game" of MASH: Hawkeye, Duke, and Trapper regularly subvert military order to get what they want, and the military bureaucracy is either too incompetent or too apathetic to punish them. In general, the doctors aren't acting on greed or treasonous intent. Instead, they usually just want to be left to their own devices — drinking, gambling, sleeping around, golfing — and to be able to practice surgery in peace. With the general support of the camp, their levels of subversion range from Radar stealing Blake's blood due to the military's failure to provide enough to the events of the entire Japan sequence. In the latter, Hawkeye and Trapper, ostensibly interested in playing golf, go to an Army hospital in Japan in order to operate on a Congressman's son. By using bluster and showcasing their medical skills, the two manage to evade the threat of court-martial at the hands of the almost cartoonishly uptight Col. Merrill, the hospital's commanding officer. Later, Capt. " Me Lay" Marston, an old friend of Hawkeye's, asks the duo to perform surgery on a half-Japanese, half-American orphan baby in desperate need of care. The two comply, despite military regulation against operating on a " native" in a U. S. Army hospital. When Merrill appears to arrest the doctors, the men almost unthinkingly proceed to gas him, unwilling to hear another word from the annoying character; later, they blackmail him by putting him

in bed with a prostitute and taking photos. The breakdown of military order in the film is thus depicted as a positive development, particularly when the surgeons subvert bureaucratic structures which are decidedly racist or otherwise immoral in the pursuit of unequivocally good aims. On a broader level, the only basic moral force in the film is entirely predicated on the doctors' skill and singular pursuit of saving lives. Irrespective of how the doctors go about achieving this aim — e. g. through the subversion of established military and social structures — the audience entirely supports them, since in the absence of a favorably-depicted patriotic force (such as a brave general or a brigade of war heroes) the doctors and their viscerally-depicted work constitute the film's only recognizably positive element. In other words, the film doesn't even propose a moral tension or contrast between, say, a military commander wanting to win a bloody battle in a just war and a group of pacifist surgeons wanting to save lives. In MASH, the military effort is so de-legitimized that the only heroes are the doctors and all impediments to their work are unequivocally bad. So powerful is the doctors' moral superiority that their propensities for sloth and vice seem completely incidental when viewed in the context of their serious efforts to save lives. The doctors, as well as the rest of the camp, regularly engage in excessive drinking, adultery, gambling, and other acts of licentiousness which flew in the face of the prevalent social mores of both early 1950s and late 1960s America. Moreover, this behavior of the camp's doctors and other servicemembers is established in the film as an integral part of their lives in Korea. Perhaps the most visible immorality in which they engage is adultery, something which Hawkeye in particular justifies through the extraordinary circumstances of being thousands of miles away from home in an isolated,

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foreign place. The Painless Pole sequence in particular showcases simply how ingrained these vices are in the behaviors of the camp's inhabitants. On the matter of "faithfulness," Painless explains to Hawkeye that he "wasn't gonna fool around out here, because I got these three girls that I'm engaged to back home," to which Hawkeye begins to reply, "And you wanted to be faithful to them, baby, you are seven thousand miles from home-." Earlier, Father Mulcahy describes the severity of Painless' depression to Hawkeye by explaining that when the prolific gambler Painless was asked for a clarification on a rule of poker, he responded: MULCAHY: 'What does it matter, it's only a game?' HAWKEYE: [in disbelief] Painless said, 'What does it matter, it's only a game?'" The irony in Hawkeye's disbelief is that to a group of people who hold so little of "traditional" values sacred — e. g., faith, country, Army, etc. — gambling is something held in high esteem. Even the highest ranking officer seen in the film, General Hammond, is a gambler, a womanizer, and a drinker; all of this, revealed during the Football sequence, calls into doubt any moral legitimacy of the war effort that might still remain by this point in the film (even if Hammond is not exactly a hypocrite, he is the closest human metonym to the actual combat Army). When propositioning Henry for a football game between his Army team and the MASH team, he remarks: HAMMOND: Special services in Tokyo says it's one of the best gimmicks we've got to keep the American way of life going here in Asia. BLAKE: Betting? HAMMOND: No, football! In many ways, this exchange represents more than an explicit critique of both American society and American pretensions for moral legitimacy. The film, as a whole, suggests that the "American way of life" necessarily includes a level of vice: of premarital or extramarital sex, of gambling, of drinking, of licentiousness,

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of drug use. These tendencies are looked upon with approval in the context of the film in part by their connection to the lifestyles of the skilled surgeons. They are held as qualities of barbarism or “insanity” to moralizers like Burns and Hot Lips, yet it’s clear enough that the truly “insane” forces of the film are those which help cause the almost unceasing stream of violence. The vice in which the doctors engage is absolutely the least destructive force in the entire film, and it is part and parcel of their lifestyles in the isolated MASH camp. In short, the “insanity” is what keeps the doctors sane when surrounded by so much cruel absurdity. The only officers in the MASH unit who are “punished” in the film are Burns and Hot Lips, both of whom are quickly revealed to be complete hypocrites. They are both introduced as fervent moralizers and defenders of propriety who look down upon the vices of their fellow soldiers, yet they engage in a willful (and awkward) adulterous act. Clearly, the film does not condemn their adultery, just their hypocrisy and the uneven implementation of their views. Burns appears all too willing to cozy up to violence in the name of faith, yet is willing to violate his own religiosity out of lust. Likewise, Hot Lips is a staunch defender of the violent military structure, yet she violates her own code of conduct for the same reason. By contrast, the other doctors are far more open about their sexual propensities, yet they have no use for war or that which aids conflict. Thus do they profess a superior morality. The fact that the hyper-patriotic Burns and Hot Lips are humiliated and ruined in the film and the licentious doctors rewarded is in itself an extraordinary subversion of cinematic practice. Just one year prior to the filming of MASH, the Hays Production Code was finally ended. Altman apparently took the initiative in capitalizing on this, choosing to include nudity, adultery, open mockery of religion, illegal drug use,

excessive alcohol use, homosexuality, profanity, miscegenation, "lustful kissing," and explicit depictions of surgery into just one two-hour film. Moreover, the "moral" or "patriotic" aspects of the Hays Code were being explicitly challenged in MASH. The sympathy of the audience falls to the apparently sinful, unlawful, and unpatriotic doctors.***In subverting the traditional premise of a war film and in violating the moral codes which once governed the content of war films, MASH places itself as a direct competitor to the propagandistic Hollywood productions of the past. Whereas up to 1970, war films set in the 20th century had primarily focused on World War II (e. g. Patton, Tora! Tora! Tora!, Catch-22 of the same year) or World War I, MASH was placed squarely in the midst of a three-year-long police action which ended in a truce. For a comedy, MASH succeeded in depicting the brutality of war with sharp moral clarity. And, like nearly all great films, it is introspective and self-conscious about the art of filmmaking itself. The film explicitly compares itself to three other war features, contrasting the excessively sunny, made-for-easy-consumption depictions of war of past studio films with the difficult realities of military conflict: death, dysfunction, futility. The unenthusiastic P. A. announcer in MASH describes one such film thus: Attention. Attention. Colonel Blake has secured for us The Halls of Montezuma. So big, only the biggest of the screen can bring it to you all. Technicolor. Tell it to the Marines, those loveable lugs with wonderful mugs so we now love more than ever. Tell 'em they're still the greatest guys in the world. Follow Lieutenant, Punchy, Limey, Babyface, Doc, The Poet, Pretty Boy and Slattery through some of the most interesting war films yet created. Due to a possible camp infection, Arlene Chu's Hollywood Grill is now off limits, that is all. And by contrast, MASH's valediction to the world was perhaps the

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ultimate undersell of a film which trafficked in so much novelty, so much wit, and so keen a perception of the times from which it emerged: Attention.

Tonight's movie has been MASH. Follow the zany antics of our combat surgeons as they cut and stitch their way along the front lines, operating as bombs and bullets burst around them; snatching laughs and love between amputations and penicillin.