

# Robert altman's subliminal reality essay



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Robert Altman's Subliminal Reality is written by Robert T. Self, an English professor at Northern Illinois. Self gives the most extensive evaluation of Altman's work and its value to the industry and the American culture. In Subliminal Reality, Self talks about Altman's unconventional approach to cinema and its effect on the subconscious mind of the viewer as the title suggests.

This paper will review the book in three main aspects: 1. How Altman's work challenges conventional Hollywood genres 2. How Altman portrays his main characters as feeble and confined by their gender roles 3. How the entertainment industry chooses to alienate itself culturally. Self took into consideration twenty one feature films by Altman from 1968 to 2000. His main focus is on the characters, the story form, and the social subject.

He writes in the introduction: " In this volume I examine Altman's films in terms of three particular aspects of art-cinema narration: its interrogation of classical Hollywood storytelling and popular genres, its representation of debilitated and ineffectual social individuality, and its reflexive analysis of the entertainment industry as complicit in cultural alienation" (Self viii para 1) Self does not seek to describe Altman as a cinematic auteur but how his work helped in the emergence of cinematic-art in America. He explains how Altman introduced modernist story telling and took on socially fragmented subjects. The does not give a chronological account of the films but divides them into three parts. The first part of the book is named Narrative Formations. This part includes the analysis of Kansa City, MASH, 3 Women, and Romance and Adventure (Self, Robert Altman).

Here Self tries to answer why the popular audience remain indifferent to his work. According to him, the American audience is used to seeing satisfying and clichéd endings and so they dismiss Altman's work as dissatisfying and insignificant (Self, Robert Altman). Then he talks about his role in introducing new American cinema in the sixties and seventies. He argues that Altman's films possess all the features of new cinema like in *MASH*, Altman uses the fragmented sound instead of the then popular classical style.

Other features include the contradictory opinions in the same story, the incoherent mentality of the characters and their self destruction, large casts, multiple stories etc. His movies provide a realistic experience rather than a fantasy, like the most Hollywood films. Unlike the conventional Hollywood cast, Altman's main characters are often physically unattractive like Shelley Duvall, exhausted like McCabe (Self, Robert Altman), and lack sensual appeal. These characteristics of his movies make it easier for the general public to relate to. Self argues that Altman often manipulates genres, romance in particular. For this he gives examples of *A Perfect Couple* to ridicule the cliché that 'opposite attracts' and *A Wedding* to expose the lie about the cliché 'happily ever after' (Self, Robert Altman).

The second part of the book is named "Identities in Patriarchy". This part deals with the films that concerned with men and women separately. Altman often portrays the weakness in men and insults their authority. Self gives the examples of *Secret Honor* and *The Gingerbread* (Self, Robert Altman).

Both these movies show the faults in popular male figures. When dealing with women, Self takes into consideration *That Cold Day*, *Images*, *3 Women*,

Come back to the five and dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean, Kansas city and Cookie's fortune (Self, Robert Altman). According to Self, Altman reveals the concerns and shortcomings of women. He writes: Inasmuch as these open narratives actualize the female voice within a male discourse, it is possible to read them as further examples of the effort of Hollywood cinema to effect an authority over women. It is also possible to read these Altman films as inversions of the hostility toward woman" (Self [web]).

Self explains in detail how the characters in Altman's films are socially restricted and expected to act according to their gender roles. In the last part, Putting on the Show, Self talks about how Altman's films reflect cinematic culture. In this part he gives examples of Nashville, The Player and Buffalo Bill (Self, Robert Altman). He discusses the subliminal reality that not only includes the film makers and the popular audience, and claims that the makers alter patriotism for profit. He sees Altman as a liberal man.

Altman provides an intellectual which limits his audience because social criticism is something which is not popular among the audience. Self talks about subliminal reality in Pret a porter in a different chapter. He appreciates the film and complains that it was not taken seriously and neglected. Self praises the framing and filming. He defines them as "the most vibrant and energetic and assertive images in all of Altman's work" (Self).

He ends the book with the chapter World elsewhere. He analyzes the film short cuts and Altman's composition of many other short stories by Raymond Carver. He talks about how Altman communicates more with the effects he adds to the story than by explanation (Self, Robert Altman). Robert Altman's

subliminal reality gives many details about the work done by a great American film director, Robert Altman, and contains valuable information on classical and American art cinema. It comprehensively covers the history of cinema, its developement, and Altman's contributions to it.