

Paper

Cinematic Craft of Life: Architecture, Music, and Spirituality in Robert Altman's McCabe & Mrs. Miller

Mikesch Muecke, Ph.D. | Department of Architecture | College of Design | Iowa State University

Rather than quote the usual suspects associated with practice, craft, materials, and making, perhaps a different approach to the conference topics would be to ask questions and offer tentative answers through the lens of cinema, and here specifically the spatial and aural work of Robert Altman in the production of his 1971 film *M McCabe & Mrs. Miller*.

Most definitions of craft make use of the word 'skill', perhaps as a shorthand description for the temporal dimension of the learning process, i.e. the amount of time required to learn a craft. But when we ask the fundamental question: "what is craft?" perhaps we can put skill aside for a moment and answer that craft is making, and not just any making, but a *making with care*. Skill depends on time expended to learn a craft. So, we could write in a brittle, mathematical way that *craft equals making with care over time*.

Why is this important to that rather ephemeral art of film-making by someone like Robert Altman? By shifting our focus away from the screen (illuminated and brought to life as a window into another world) and towards the actual craft of making which involves the mindful intersection of ideas with materials—the temporal construction of shots/sequences in locations and on sets within a community of artists—perhaps the cinematic realm can make itself a home in a craft that transcends both the spatial and the aural.

Throughout his life Altman preferred character to narrative, foregrounding the behavior of individuals within a group over straightforward story telling. In *M McCabe & Mrs. Miller* Altman mines the tension between the sacred and the secular as characters through a series of triangulated negotiations and oppositions. In this film, early in his career, the movie goer/listener is treated to the development of a frontier town in the American northwest,¹ but while the camera hovers around the lives of McCabe (Warren Beatty) and Mrs. Miller (Julie Christie), they are not the film's stars in a conventional sense. The town's inhabitants, the weather, the sacred, the music, the secular, and a steam tractor all play important roles. Specifically, the sacred appears to be represented by the building which gives the town its name—Presbyterian Church. The church is located prominently at the entrance to the rickety collection of tents and ramshackle buildings at the beginning of the movie when McCabe arrives to Leonard Cohen's ballad of the *Stranger Song*. In fact, the church's builder, Reverend Elliot, is in the process of framing the church spire, and he is visible in the same view as the gambler McCabe (a signifier of the secular) readies himself to develop the few shelters into a proper town. The other secular branch of the triangle arrives later in the form of two groups of prostitutes, the first brought to Presbyterian Church to a view of the Reverend adding the wooden cross to the church's steeple, accompanied by Leonard Cohen's *Sisters of Mercy*, and the second when Mrs. Miller rides into town a short while later on a steam tractor to strike a deal with McCabe. Here Altman shows the tractor slowly rolling by the now almost finished church, with the Reverend again working on the steeple.

What makes *M McCabe & Mrs. Miller* different from other westerns is not only the location but also Altman's transfer of the role the church—as a community of people—would conventionally play,

¹ The film was shot in West Vancouver and Squamish, British Columbia.

to the group of women who live and work in town. It is not the church that offers shelter but Mrs. Miller's brothel, and its bath house serves as a secular baptismal font.² Just like the town's architectural growth can be measured by the number of new buildings that are constructed as the movie progresses, so the community of Presbyterian Church grows both more numerous and closer during the film. The carpenters building the town lived *in* the film set as it was being constructed and filmed for the movie, encouraging the actors to consider the movie set as real estate, i.e. a place to both live in and act as life and art converge into one recorded linear sequence. Altman also put microphones on all actors and some extras, allowing him to raise or lower the sound in post-production to control where he wanted the cinema goers to focus on, independent from where the actors were located spatially within the frame.

Altman depicts life as lived, life as art, and life as craft. In an interview Jack De Govia calls Leon Ericksen, the film's production designer, the "genius of the handmade film for our time" [whose work is marked] "by an incredible level of detail." According to Ericksen, Altman told him: "You give me a town I can believe, and I'll give you a film you can believe." In McCabe & Mrs. Miller both the town as site and the making of the film converge into one experience that transcends the material world. They become poetry.

In the commentary to the film (recorded in 2002), Altman says that he thinks "about it more as a painting." For him making films as art are the very antithesis of commercial work. What matters is quality, not quantity, and the reason for this, according to Altman, is that there is "no competition with arts."³ The spiritual is art, film making, painting, poetry of the highest kind. Art that transcends life, and in the process becomes the life of art, or a *Lebenskunst*.

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³ In video-taped comments about Kurasawa's *Rashomon*.