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Altman...Now, More Than Ever:
Social Conflict in the Films of Robert Altman

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Altman’s America: Theory and Terminology.....	6
Status Group Relationships.....	12
<i>Nashville</i> and the 1970s	19
Leading Up to Nashville: Early Status Films	19
Nashville	24
Conclusion	34
Highbrow and Middlebrow: Conflict in <i>Short Cuts</i>	36
Formal Storytelling.....	38
Status in <i>Short Cuts</i>	41
Conclusion	49
<i>Gosford Park</i>	51
Establishing Status Upstairs.....	53
Downstairs: Keep it to Yourself	55
Conclusion	60
Conclusion	62
Endnotes.....	64
Bibliography	66

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ABSTRACT

There is much scholarship to suggest that the idea of America is an idea of a meritocracy. Generally, the ideal construction of American meritocracy involves people working hard and being able to accomplish whatever they set their minds to. Filmmaker Robert Altman constructs a very different America. In Altman's eyes, success is achieved through promotion, either self-promotion or promotion by others. An individual's status, whether it be within a peer group or on a national level, is far more important than the actual work that that person has done. This thesis will also examine how Altman presents this promotion as a form of storytelling, and how Altman creates a relationship between promotion, storytelling, and conflict between different status structures. This analysis will include not only elements of the larger plots and themes of the selected films (*Nashville*, *Short Cuts*, and *Gosford Park*,) but formal analysis as well.

Introduction

The narratives that Robert Altman constructs in his films center on a belief that America as a society is built first and foremost not around merit, but around the idea of status. Altman's America exists not as a meritocracy where one's achievements are important, but instead as a place where a person's status within a social hierarchy is most valued. The most important component of Altman's interest in a status-based society deals with the relationship between status and promotion, most particularly self-promotion. In Altman's films, a person's merit has become secondary to that person's ability to promote an idealized version of that person.

At the same time, these films mirror the direction of Altman's career, and exist as metaphors for how he sees his own status within American cinema. While these films are investigations of an American society predicated on status, they are also studies in where Altman feels he is in his career at the time these films were made. Altman's changing views about the ways that status is either maintained or obtained mirror what he feels his place is as his career progresses.

Early in Altman's career, he embarked on a series of investigations of the ways that people promoted themselves in order to accrue status. In 1970's *M*A*S*H**, Altman looks at the relationship between talent and rank in the United States Army. Some of the characters in *M*A*S*H** are good at their jobs, but how well they do their jobs is not necessarily reflected in their ranks. Both John McIntyre and Hawkeye Pierce clearly have more talent than Major Burns, and yet Burns has higher rank because he follows the chain of command. During the course of the film, the traditional military rank structure

erodes, as Altman's characters begin to develop their own statusphere based upon both a person's talent and that person's personality. The alternative statusphere in *M*A*S*H** exists as a construction that suggests that, at this point in his career, Altman believed that rank and talent have something of an inverse relationship.

The following year, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* showed that, according to Altman, successful promotion of an image is neither directly nor inversely related to one's actual talent. John McCabe relies on the fact that he has a reputation as a highly skilled gunfighter to gain status in the town of Presbyterian Church, Washington. Because McCabe neither confirms nor explicitly denies the claim of his superior gun fighting skills, Altman implies that the reputation is not earned. Altman creates a problematic that would recur in subsequent films (that of the relationship between talent and promotion) with the final shootout scene. Consequently, the image of himself that McCabe is exploiting might be legitimate.

This problematic between talent and status would lead Altman into his most heralded film of the 1970s, *Nashville*. *Nashville* was the first film to introduce several of the concepts with which Altman would work in subsequent films. The figurative promotion of *McCabe* became literal in *Nashville*. Personalities as Barbara Jean and Haven Hamilton negotiated their way through the Nashville statusphere in part through the creation and promotion of a particular conception of the country music star.

Both Hamilton and Barbara Jean successfully project the image of the humble, down to earth star. They have a sense of common origin with their fan base, and they eschew the appearance of self-promotion. Connie White clashes with these two by being

a character that does not hide her desire to self-promote. She may share other common characteristics with Hamilton and Barbara Jean, but her naked promotion sets her apart from them. Sueleen Gay is consigned to the bottom of Hamilton's statusphere particularly because of her lack of talent. Sueleen has no singing talent and none of the promotional aptitude that the other characters possess. These characters each have their respective places in the statusphere, and their place is determined by both their talent and their willingness to promote.

While *Nashville* is a film that addresses a single statusphere, the focus of *Short Cuts* is the concern with the difference between highbrow and middlebrow cultural formations. Each of these statuspheres has their own criteria for success. Altman uses this film to establish what he believes are the differences between the two statuspheres. In particular, Altman poses the theory that one of the core markers of highbrow status is a lack of concern with one's own status. Similarly, the concern with status automatically denotes middlebrow status. Yet, because Altman has this concern, it necessarily places film in the middlebrow statusphere.

The nature of promotion changes in *Short Cuts*. Whereas in *Nashville* promotion is the selling of an image to a large group of people, in this film promotion becomes intertwined with the concept of storytelling, particularly the telling of lies. Many characters lie about some part of their lives in order to preserve their status. These lies can also take the form of delusions, particularly on the part of the middlebrows. Altman posits that the inherent middlebrow concern with status necessarily leads to self-delusion. These people delude themselves into believing that they can raise themselves

into a higher statusphere, while Altman makes it clear that this belief is a necessary component of middlebrow status.

The resistance of status structures to upward mobility continues in *Gosford Park*, as Altman uses the dynamic of newness opposing longevity as a means of examining the relationship between status and storytelling. Self-promotion in *Gosford Park* becomes self-protection as statuspheres turn inward on themselves. This conflict between old and new exists in Altman's earlier films, but he makes it the focus of *Gosford Park*. Altman looks at the old/new relationship in the context of two statuspheres in an English country house. In the upstairs, people who had old money status seek to preserve that status by making new money less valid. Downstairs, members of this statusphere use their relative status as a coping mechanism for their social inferiority. Both of these statuspheres become inwardly focused, often ignoring the other statusphere.

In each of the three main films, Altman uses some type of formal bisociation as a key to each text's main preoccupation. In *Nashville*, the opening sequence serves as a promotion for the film itself. This self-reflexivity allows Altman to examine the concept of promotion (and different vehicles for promotion) as a filmmaking technique. In the later films, self-reflexivity becomes a means of examining the role of film in the world of art. In *Short Cuts*, the self-reflexivity manifests itself in the way that Altman takes the short stories of Raymond Carver and "cuts" them together to make a single coherent film. This cutting shows Altman's uneasiness with film's place with regard to the middlebrow and highbrow statuspheres. Altman struggles to give film some type of highbrow legitimacy through these tongue-in-cheek cuts. *Gosford Park's* self-reflexivity highlights

the defensive self-insularity of the upstairs statusphere. The film within the film draws attention to the upstairs' inability to acknowledge the downstairs statusphere beyond its ability to serve.

Altman's concept of status changes during the course of his career. In *M*A*S*H**, Altman is concerned with showing ways in which the traditional concept of rank is undermined. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* introduces the problematic of the relationship between talent and status, and how promotion can influence this problematic. *Nashville* introduces the concept of the promotion of a specific type of image, and how one's status can be affected by the ability (or inability) to project that image. In *Short Cuts*, Altman suggests that statuspheres can compete with one another, and that members of each statusphere police their status through lies and self-delusion. Finally, with *Gosford Park*, Altman sees status as something that is insular, and storytelling as a way of constructing the walls of that insularity. These changes are also manifestations of the way in which Altman sees himself within the film statusphere.

Altman's America: Theory and Terminology

Robert Altman suggests an alternative to the traditional discourse of the American dream. Altman sets his films to problematize America as a place where success is achieved through hard work, talent, perseverance, and moral uplift. This construction of American society is typified by the idea of the craft ethic. The craft ethic is a concept through which the act of working is tied directly to a person's character. If an individual is hard-working, they will, by virtue of their good character, be prosperous in the United States. In his work *Chants Democratic*, Sean Wilentz argues that, particularly in early periods of American labor history, work was so valued that it was equated with personal honor.¹

Altman constructs his America as a society predicated on the concept of status. Altman's "statusocracy" combines three important factors. The first of these factors is promotion (specifically, self-promotion.) Promotion, in Altman's films, is the selling of an image about one's self. The image projection can become apparent in a variety of ways. Sometimes, promotion manifests itself in a literal way, such as an interview by a country singer with a chosen reporter or an in-film commercial for the film. In other instances, a person does not promote himself or herself but the person's own status. Regardless of how it is done, promotion is an act of advertisement designed to either increase or preserve one's social status.

The second of these three factors is storytelling. Within the context of Altman's work, storytelling has several forms. Depending upon the context, it sometimes means the formal techniques by which Altman tells the stories in his films. When applied to the

characters, this process is instead a form of promotion in and of itself. These people tell stories about themselves, with the goal of promoting a certain image. The final central factor is the relationship between people and groups of people in positions of high status and people and groups of people in positions of middle status. While the first two components are important to the establishment of an individual's status, these struggles between competing status groups are vital to the establishment (and maintenance) of the status of groups.

Status itself is very significant in Altman's films, but the relationship between different levels of status becomes more important, particularly during the advancement of his career. Altman constructs a series of cultural hierarchies within his films, and often the clashes between high status groups and middle status groups manifest themselves as clashes of cultural hierarchies.

When discussing such cultural hierarchies, the term class is inadequate in the context of Altman's films. In particular, class has a great deal of inherent Marxist connotations that deal specifically with a person's (or group of persons) place in an economic or socioeconomic hierarchy. Class is inexorably tied to economics, and is therefore an imprecise term for the purposes of this investigation. Thus, the term class (which would be a term with which a reader could more easily identify but for the inherent economic implications) must be cast aside in favor of the idea of status.

The idea of status (as an alternative to class) comes from the writings of Max Weber. In his essay "Class, Status, and Party," Weber outlines his ideas as they relate to status. Weber argues that concepts such as class and status groups are "phenomena of the

distribution of power within a community.”² In addition to class, which is based on property, Weber discusses the distribution of power within the context of what he calls “social honor.” Social honor is a concept that Weber equates very closely with prestige; the people who are most well known within a given community are those people who have achieved the greatest social honor.³ Weber further expands the concept of social honor to include “status honor.” Status honor is predicated, naturally, on status, which Weber differentiates from class in several ways.

Weber uses the term “status group” to delineate an actual “amorphous” group that is defined by a combination of “every typical component of the life of men that is determined by a specific, positive, social estimation of honor.”⁴ Weber stresses that, unlike class, status is not inexorably tied to property. According to Weber, both people with property and people without property are equally capable of belonging to the same status group. Despite this, Weber argues that while economics do not inherently determine status, people within a given status group will ultimately recognize the economic disparities between the people within that same status group. Weber gives an example by saying,

The equality of status among American gentlemen, for instances, is expressed by the fact that outside the subordination determined by the different functions of business, it would be considered strictly repugnant – wherever the old tradition still prevails – if even the richest boss, while playing billiards or cards in his club would not treat his clerk as in every sense fully his equal in birthright, but would bestow upon hi the condescending status-conscious “benevolence” which the German boss can never dis sever from his attitude.⁵

Weber continues by saying that status carries with it certain lifestyle expectations. In particular, the lifestyle expectations within a certain status group are what compel people

to want to become a part of that status group. This is what makes social and status mobility something that is desirable. The lifestyle components of a particular status group are also, partially, part of what Weber terms “submission to fashion.” By being fashionable, a person (a man, as Weber asserts, but this claim can easily be applied to women as well) is visually presenting the possibility that that person is a member of a particular status group. The recognition that this person gets from being instantly identifiable as a member of a status group ultimately becomes at least as important as their “class.”⁶

The great difficulty in simply taking Weber’s and other’s¹ concept of status groups at face value and applying it to this investigation of Robert Altman’s films is that, despite many attempts to do so, Weber cannot create a plausible conception of status that is not tied in some way to economics. He distinguishes his own idea of class from the concept of status, but cannot seem to get away from the idea that distinctions within a particular status structure will eventually manifest themselves through the difference in the amount of capital (which Weber considers property that is used to acquire more property)⁷ between two people in a particular status group. So even if status groups are not created by some function of economics, some type of economic concern ultimately shapes the way in which these groups hierarchically self-organize. Weber’s concept, particularly the idea of “submission to fashion” provides a useful starting point, but

¹ Weber’s definition of class seems to inform most other definitions of class that are provided by subsequent scholars. In *How Class Works: Objective and Subjective Aspects of Class Since the 1970s*, Michael Hout defines class as “how people earn their money, how much money they have, or what they do with their money.” Kurt Mayer argues that, in a “class system,” the “social hierarchy is based primarily upon differences in monetary wealth and income.” These concepts of class grow out of Weber’s ideas.

combining Weber's ideas with the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu and American author Tom Wolfe provides a clearer picture of the idea of "status."

While status as Weber defines it can be gained through promotion, in Altman's films it is also acquired through the accumulation of cultural capital. According to Pierre Bourdieu in his work *Distinction*, cultural capital exists as a parallel to economic capital in that it is possible for those with great economic capital to accumulate cultural capital.⁸ However, cultural capital and economic capital do not necessarily go hand in hand. Skilled and respected visual artists may not be particularly wealthy. However, they may still be able to both broker and accrue cultural capital by virtue of their work. Some artists and educators are able to accumulate cultural capital without possessing economic capital.⁹ It is for this reason that status is a more apt description than class of the distinctions Altman makes. The cultivation of various forms of cultural capital does not suggest class mobility in and of itself, but it does indicate the possibility of status mobility.

According to Wolfe critic and historian Thomas L. Hartshorne, Tom Wolfe's career has been primarily concerned with the idea of status. Hartshorne writes that Wolfe is interested in "how [status] is defined, established, differentiated, and enforced, how people react to status clashes and anxieties, and how various subcultures erect alternative status systems to those prevailing in the dominant culture or in other subcultures."¹⁰

Where Wolfe begins to depart from some Weberian ideas is in his treatment of those who create the conventions surrounding the appearances of particular status groups. Wolfe also constructs status groups in such a manner as to suggest that status is, for

Wolfe, the principal mode of self-identification in American culture. In *The Right Stuff*, Wolfe posits that status as a test pilot (and, later, astronaut) is the primary manner in which these men self-identify.¹¹ It is the particular group to which they belong that gives them their own identity.

Appearance is important to Wolfe not only in his criticism of particular groups (and the methods by which they define themselves,) but also in the formation of his idea of the “status sphere.”¹² Essentially, a status sphere is a status group that is entirely self-defined and self-contained, without regard for the perceptions of those outside of the status sphere. As Hartshorne writes, “[f]rom Wolfe’s account, it is obvious that [Hugh] Hefner is very, very pleased with himself and what he has accomplished. In his own terms, he definitely has it made. But how about Wolfe’s terms?”¹³ Hartshorne continues by saying that, “[Hefner] is a shallow kid, inordinately please with the array of gadgets he uses to insulate himself from the world outside his mansion.”¹⁴ Hefner has, in Wolfe’s eyes, created a sphere of influence in which the area outside of that sphere is entirely unimportant. This is the heart of Wolfe’s idea of the status sphere. The sphere is largely self-insulated from the society in which it operates.

The concept of “status” that I will use in this thesis is something of an amalgamation of these three writers. The ideas set forth by Weber, particularly with regard to the blurring of lines when examining the relationship between those who own property and those who do not, are particularly useful. Additionally, submission to fashion is extraordinarily important to the understanding of what is meant by the term status. Submission to fashion does not always manifest itself in ways that would be

readily identifiable to Weber in Altman's films. In Altman's films, "fashion" takes the form of physical status markers. Wolfe's concepts of status are also helpful, primarily for the notion of the status sphere. Altman's films are filled with such spheres, though Altman does not always treat particular status spheres with the same disdain that Wolfe often shows, particularly for spheres that appear to emphasize wealth and materialism. "Status" in the context of these Altman films is the way that social standing is recognized.

The idea that hard work is an indicator of the possibility for social and economic mobility is not completely absent from all Altman films; most of his films simply present an alternative idea of America. The people are more interested in improving their status than they are in economic gains. If economic gains become a part of their increased status, then so be it. However, the characters in Altman's films ascend status ladders, not economic ones.

Status Group Relationships

In addition to relationships and conflicts among individuals, Altman's films are concerned with the relationships between status groups. In his book *The Culture of Spontaneity*, Daniel Belgrad outlines the distinctions between "highbrow" and "middlebrow" culture.² An idea derived from *Harper's Magazine* columnist Russell Lynes, Belgrad asserts that "social distinctions that had once been associated with economic status were translated in the 1940s and '50s into cultural positions, as an elite

² According to Joan Shelley Rubin, Margaret Widdemer's 1933 essay "Message and Middlebrow" provides an early definition of "middlebrow" that encompasses "men and women, fairly civilized, fairly literate, who support the critics and lecturers and publishers by purchasing their wares." The middlebrow is distinctly separate from high brow, but it also finds itself above lowbrow culture.

defended its 'higher' tastes, whether modern or genteel, against the onslaught of abundance."¹⁵ Lynes himself explains the changes by saying that, "The old structure of the upper class, the middle class, and the lower class is on the wane."¹⁶

Belgrad and Lynes both assert that traditional ideas of class (and their corresponding societal implications) have given way to organization related more specifically to culture. In particular, there is competition between the high and middle brows. The middlebrow struggles for legitimacy against the highbrow, who seeks to solidify their position at the top of the societal structure. In particular, the highbrows accused middlebrows of valuing art only as a means of "profit and advancement."¹⁷ This attitude was in stark contrast to highbrow culture's own contention that its own interest in art and literature was driven by some desire to be a positive moral influence.¹⁸

Altman's films are rife with examples of clashes between highbrow and middlebrow culture. However, not all of the clashes between types of culture in Altman's films can be easily explained by the highbrow/middlebrow dynamic. Indeed, in Altman's films the conflict could be better described as "old brow" and "new brow." The dynamic of morality against a desire for profit is very much alive in Altman's films, but it is created as an issue not of high versus middle brow, but one of cultural longevity. Altman creates a number of situations in his films in which two types of art symbolize some type of status conflict. These conflicts frequently manifest themselves as issues between a "popular" form of art and a "classical" form of art; conflicts in which these proponents of these two types of art vie for the supremacy of their respective crafts.

Storytelling is important to Altman's American statusocracy in two ways. The first manner in which storytelling is important relates to the structure of Altman's films. This is the way in which Altman tells the story. The formal elements of Altman's films are particularly important, as shots and scenes are often constructed to suggest (but not necessarily specifically delineate) particular power relationships. The camera, as used by Altman, is sometimes a democratizing force, giving people of different levels of societal status equal value. More importantly, the camera gives the reader of the text the opportunity to discern what in the story is important to them. This democratization of the camera effectively allows both Altman and the viewer to observe the interactions between both members of the same status sphere and the spheres themselves. As his career advances, particularly in *Gosford Park*, the formal elements of Altman's storytelling become over-emphasized as a means of emphasizing the importance of the statuspheric relationships. However, these techniques should not be seen as deemphasizing of storytelling so much as an attempt to highlight how important Altman sees the act of telling a story in America.

Altman frequently introduces characters and formal elements in his films that I will call bisociations. Bisociation, a term which Alan Karp appropriates from Arthur Koestler, is a term to describe the balancing of two contradictory narratives that coexist within one character or formal element. Altman uses these bisociations to establish one of the key ways he explores the themes of talent, status, and promotion: the balance between the indeterminate degrees of self irony in the film (both in terms of the characters and the film itself) and the belief in the truth of one's own image. Altman's

characters frequently display some level of knowledge that their own image and position within the statuspheres he examines does not equal their level of talent. At the same time, the characters often find themselves caught up in their status, believing that it is an accurate reflection of their respective talents. Altman's critique of this bisociative is informed by Karp and Koestler's concept of the "riddle."

Alan Karp argues that most art (specifically films and novels) are seen to contain "an element of the riddle that the spectator must solve through a process of imaginative recreation."¹⁹ "Implication" is a technique that, according to Koestler, shifts the burden of the aforementioned riddle from the artist to the audience for the particular piece of art.²⁰ This idea of implication is the primary way in which Altman relates his ideas regarding status to the idea of promotion. These implications compel the viewer to solve the riddle of each character's relationship between their talent, their status, and the way in which they are promoted. Many of the characters, particularly those who are performers, promote an image of themselves that is often different from the reality of their existence.

In order to consider the ideas in these films Altman's (film is, after all, a collaborative art form) one must consider Altman an *auteur*. Articulated by French film critics such as Andre Bazin, *auteur* theory considers the director the sole creative voice of a film. Consequently, both a single film and the greater catalogue of a director's career should (according to auteur theorists) be a reflection of a unified directorial worldview.²¹ While some of Altman's films are unquestionably collaborative (he employs a variety of screenwriters and editors, and most of the dialogue is improvised,)²² some of the formal

elements of his films, particularly the self-reflexivity that characterizes his work must come specifically from him.

Self-reflexivity in film is not unique to Altman. In fact, the internal self-reference of Altman's work is often characteristic of the early French New Wave filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard. Godard notoriously loaded his films with references both to other films and references to film as an art form.²³ Altman's use of self-reflexivity is an attempt to associate himself with so-called "art" directors like Godard. This demonstrates his concern, during the course of his career, with his own status in the American film statusphere, as he tries to prove his own artistic merit.

Altman's films contain some kind of negotiation of a variety of worldviews by the author. The construction of status groups and status spheres in the various films hinges upon the manner in which Altman negotiates these worldviews. The critical work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his idea of heteroglossia suggest that the author of a literary work negotiates various worldviews within the context of a single text. Bakhtin's theory suggests that any text has multiple literary or narrative voices beyond those of the narrator or authorial voice.²⁴ This theory will be particularly invaluable in terms of developing ideas regarding *Short Cuts*, which is a film that revolves around a number of individual stories in both the high-brow and middle-brow world. However, this concept of multiple worldviews or narrative voices does not apply only to *Short Cuts*. Furthermore, this concept of negotiating various worldviews is not the only way in which storytelling is important in Altman's films.

Altman constructs many of his characters as unreliable narrators of their own stories. James Phelan constructs the unreliable narrator in his *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. In any form, according to Phelan, the narrator has three functions – interpretation, reporting, and evaluating – within the context of the narrative. When a narrator offers an account that differs from the account offered by the implied author, that author becomes unreliable.²⁵ As educator Michael Smith noted, an unreliable narrator as described by Phelan must be regarded with skepticism when that person makes a statement, as that person has a personal interest in either the information itself, or the manner in which the information is disseminated.²⁶ This is true of the bulk of Altman's principal characters.

In Altman's films, he creates characters which are often clearly deluded about their own circumstances and, perhaps more importantly, how these delusions affect the stories about themselves that they tell to people within their own status spheres. Altman's characters are also often unreliable because of their tendency to engage in lies of omission, which are most often apparent in *Gosford Park*. These characters conceal information about themselves for a variety of reasons with regard to status hierarchy.

The next chapter presents the discussion of the first major film, 1975's *Nashville*. Using other contemporary Altman films to provide some personal historical context, the purpose of this chapter is to establish Altman's idea of a society that is based primarily on status and promotion. This chapter contains an examination of the power-plays that are at the heart of *Nashville* and how these power plays make talent secondary to image. The *Nashville* chapter also pays special attention to the campaign of Hal Philip Walker, and

how this campaign parallels not only the self-promotion of various characters but the self-conscious manner in which the film promotes itself.

The fourth chapter changes the focus to the 1993 film *Short Cuts*. The focus on *Short Cuts* in this chapter serves two functions. This chapter explores the various ways in which the cultural formations of middlebrow society accrue cultural capital in the traditional Bourdieuan sense as a way of attempting to become highbrow. The second purpose of this chapter is to investigate the ways in which Altman's ideas about promotion of status evolve into ideas about storytelling to maintain status. To accomplish this, it is necessary to examine the ways in which characters either lie or engage in self-delusion. There is one more component of storytelling that is examined; the formal components. Many of Altman's cuts in the film seem self-congratulatory. The self-referential cuts are examined as an integral component of the ways in which stories are told.

The fifth chapter focuses on the final film, 2001's *Gosford Park*. The analysis of *Gosford Park* focuses on how the dynamic between longevity and newness is related to the concepts of status and promotion. In *Gosford Park*, the statuspheres become self-insulating. In this film, Altman posits that telling stories serves as a way of maintaining that defensive insularity. Members of the two statuspheres tell stories about their respective societies in order to preserve these insular units. In *Gosford Park*, promotion becomes a means of insulating and maintaining the place of a particular group within a statusphere.

Nashville and the 1970s

Robert Altman's 1975 film *Nashville* was long (and sometimes still is) considered his masterpiece. This seminal film in the Robert Altman catalogue is the most direct and specific example of the director's interest in American statusocracy. Altman uses three primary female characters in *Nashville* to show the manner in which people achieve and improve their status in the United States. Altman constructs a world in which the act of promotion, particularly self-promotion, is one way in which these people improve their status. This promotion manifests itself in many forms, from the cultivation of personal relationships that enhance status to the projection of certain images of the country music star. The film examines the ways in which characters promote themselves (and are promoted,) and how these various means of promotion allow them to function within the Nashville statusphere. The film also examines the struggles for supremacy and legitimacy among the various statuspheres in Nashville.

Leading Up to Nashville – Early Status Films

Altman's early ideas about status, particularly status relationships and promotion, are linked in large part to his interest in the deconstruction of the myth of the American dream. The ways in which he undermines the conventions of the American dream are best articulated within the context of two films; 1970's *M*A*S*H** and 1971's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* solidified Altman's reputation as a director who subverted genre (in this case, the western) as a means of providing a template for some type of cultural criticism (in this case, the American dream myth.) Alan Karp argues that Altman uses "the western formula as a superficial, but nonetheless essential,

foundation... [to] virtually explode the myth of the “American dream” in a way that would not be possible in any other genre.”²⁷ I would further argue that McCabe’s optimism and belief in the image he has cultivated for himself is crushed throughout the course of the film by his own lack of self-knowledge with regard to his limitations. McCabe believes that he is the quintessential American frontiersman, capable of conquering any obstacle using his own ingenuity.

Within the film, the depiction of McCabe as the western hero exists on two levels. Warren Beatty’s McCabe is recognizable as the American hero of the old west to the viewing audience. Altman shows McCabe simultaneously as cultivating that very image to the other characters within the film. This image within the film, as it is projected to the townspeople, and the role that McCabe and other characters play in constructing that image, is largely ignored by both Karp and Keyssar.

When the film first introduces McCabe, one of the patrons in the saloon (Rene Auberjonois’s Sheehan) confronts McCabe about his reputation as a feared gun fighter. McCabe neither confirms nor denies Sheehan’s intimations regarding his reputation. Consequently, Sheehan circulates the idea that McCabe is, in fact, a dangerous gunman. The fear within the community that this story elicits affords McCabe the opportunity to become an increasingly important member of the community. McCabe is engaging in a kind of promotion. Initially, he self-promotes in a passive manner: by not denying Sheehan’s speculation, he is encouraging a particular image of himself to be spread around the community.

Altman places a great deal of emphasis on the exploration of the ambiguity of the relationship between McCabe's status, the way his status is promoted, and his actual talent. McCabe remains largely silent with regard to the question of his own status as a legendary gunman. This allows Altman to suggest that McCabe's status is somehow not legitimate. Viewers of the film are intended to watch the film under the assumption that McCabe's status within the community is earned without McCabe possessing any talent of his own. McCabe kills the first two of these three men hired to kill him, but he shoots both of them in the back rather than in the archetypal western film shootout, with the men standing far apart in a long alley or clearing. McCabe's killing of two gunmen might reasonably call into question the degree to which his status is undeserved (relative to his talent,) but these killings might also be attributable to luck on McCabe's part. With the last killing, McCabe draws the Derringer pistol which he is famous for using. With the revelation of the pistol, Altman forces the audience to question the relationship between McCabe's promotion and his talent. McCabe's use of the legendary pistol suggests that, at the very least, the story about him killing a man is probably true.

If *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* developed Altman's ideas about the relationship between status and promotion, *M*A*S*H** provided a template for the status conflicts that define *Nashville*. *M*A*S*H** takes place during the Korean War, and follows the actions of a groups of doctors at a mobile military hospital as a means of examining the statuspheric structures of the American military.

Like the Wolfian statuspheres of *The Right Stuff*, in *M*A*S*H** there are two important types of statusphere. The military is organized by rank, and rank is the most

apparent form of status organization in the film. Colonels outrank majors, who outrank lieutenants, who outrank sergeants, who outrank privates. Many of the main characters of *M*A*S*H** hold the higher ranked officers in high regard simply because of their rank. But this chain of command is not as important to many of the major characters as is the alternative statusphere. The alternative form of status in *M*A*S*H** is something much more akin to an informal fraternity than to rank.²⁸ (This type of statusphere is also present in Wolfe's stories, particularly *The Right Stuff*.)

Within the confines of the military hospital, the characters in *M*A*S*H** organize themselves into these two distinct and competing statuspheres. The first is led by Robert Duvall's Major Frank Marion "Ferret Face" Burns and, initially, Sally Kellerman's Major "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan. In particular, Burns is a stereotypically by the book and rather self-righteously religious military officer. Early in the film, he blames an assistant for the death of a patient by saying that the death occurred because his assistant failed to bring him a particular type of needle. Burns calls the man "an idiot" and tells the assistant, "you killed him" despite the fact that the patient was clearly already dead. Burns berates the young assistant as a way of maintaining his rank.

Altman uses Burns's reaction to this death to suggest that Burns's ability as a surgeon does not match his lofty rank within the *M*A*S*H** unit. Despite his reaction to the death of this patient, it is clear that the death is Burns's responsibility. The fact that he is a superior officer gives him the means to browbeat the junior officer, which is in turn an opportunity for Burns to disguise his own incompetence.

The competing statusphere is similar to Wolfe's concept of the fraternal statusphere that exists in *The Right Stuff*. John "Trapper John" McIntyre (Elliott Gould,) along Donald Southerland's Benjamin Franklin "Hawkeye" Pierce and Augustus "Duke" Forrest (Tom Skerritt) form the core of this status group that is in opposition to Major Burns and Major O'Houlihan. This group, which Helene Keyssar describes as primarily fraternal,²⁹ subverts almost all possible ideas of proper military behavior while competing with Major Burns.

The two status spheres are in competition for control of the base. In *M*A*S*H**, promotion exists as a kind of weapon in the struggle between the statuspheres. The promotion of the fraternal statusphere is typified by the prank that McIntyre, Pierce and Forrest pull on "Hotlips" while she is in the shower. The three surgeons organize what is essentially a viewing of "Hotlips" showering by removing the cover on the shower tent.³ Keyssar writes about the manner in which women become essential to the continuance and the expansion (in more general terms) of the idea of fraternity.³⁰ While the external audience (the viewers of the film) never sees "Hotlips" nude, the external audience does see the internal audience reacting to the display. Revealing "Hotlips" in the nude solidifies (and promotes) this particular fraternity. When the curtain is drawn on the shower tent, a great number of people who were not originally part of the "show" stop what they were otherwise doing and being watching "Hotlips." Some of these characters begin to interact more with McIntyre and Pierce than they had before.

³ Keyssar suggests that the way this sequence is constructed, with "Hotlips" nude form visible to the spectators within the film (what Keyssar and other refer to as the "internal audience") only, is an attack on Hollywood conventions regarding femininity and sexuality.³

The revelation of “Hotlips’s” naked body also allows Altman to introduce the problematic of “authenticity” in relation to status. Much as the death of a patient calls into question Major Marion’s competence (and, as a result, the legitimacy of his status,) “Hotlips” being put on display calls into question the authenticity of her character. Hawkeye and Trapper John seek to determine whether or not her pubic hair is blonde, ostensibly to determine whether or not she is a natural blonde. However, Altman does not actually answer this question of authenticity. The “unveiling” of Hotlips consists of a series of close-ups of Hotlips from the neck up cut between various shots of enlisted soldiers waiting in anticipation. However, Altman does not directly answer the question of “Hotlips” as an authentic blond. A series of medium-close shots of the various male characters shows that the question is answered for them. Altman leaves the question open to his viewers, thus introducing authenticity as a problematic without necessarily providing an answer. This open investigation of the authenticity of “Hotlips’s” personal image would serve as a template for future films, particularly *Nashville*.

These two early 1970s films serve as templates for Altman’s ideas about status and promotion. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* functions as a study in individual promotion. *M*A*S*H** is an investigation of the relationship between competing statuspheres. Both of these examinations of status that Altman undertakes would inform his investigation of the country music world in *Nashville*.

Nashville

Nashville is a film which explores the relationship between talent and promotion within the context of status advancement. It is an investigation of the ways in which a

variety of characters with a variety of relationships to the country music industry negotiate their own movement within the statuspheres of Nashville, TN. Altman uses these characters to examine the relationship between talent, promotion, and self-promotion. Additionally, Altman expands upon the interstatuspheric conflicts at which he hints in *M*A*S*H**, as well as introducing elements of intrastatuspheric conflict. Some of Altman's investigations are inconclusive, but the dynamic of the relationship between talent, status, and promotion is explored in great depth.

David Breskin comments that of all of Altman's films, *Nashville* is the most "American." He argues that the film is a portrait of America by "digging for and then dynamiting all [of] the myths and clichés that make Americans *Americans*."³¹ This includes, most notably, the notion that hard work, perseverance, and persistence are integral to success. In particular, Altman's characters are studies in the erosion of the ideal American work ethic. These characters are also studies in the relationship between talent and the American work ethic. As with McCabe, some of Altman's characters are legitimately talented. Some of them are completely devoid of talent. The common theme through these various characters (according to Breskin) is that none of the major characters achieves status through the traditional American dream story.³²

The beginning of the film itself is in actuality a promotion for the film. Alan Karp⁴ describes the introduction of the film as "a bisociative assault [that] is unleashed through the efforts of an unseen announcer who barks out a stream of superlatives as he

⁴ Alan Karp writes about the manner in which Altman plays on the bisociative ideas of appearance and reality as they relate to the characters and bicentennial themes in the film.⁴ Karp borrows the neologism "bisociation" from Arthur Koestler's *The Act of Creation*. Koestler uses the term bisociation as a means of providing a formal analysis."⁴ Karp clarifies the concept of bisociation by placing it not in the context of the creation of art, but instead to the consumption of art.⁴

introduces the film's twenty-four 'stars,' many of whom the audience has probably never heard of."³³ The introduction continues by bombarding the external audience with pictures of these various stars and repetition of the name of the film. The title of the film flashes across the screen in a variety of bright colors. This self-conscious recognition of the idea of promotion at the beginning of the film serves as an indicator that the film is about promotion.

The most complex character with regard to status, promotion, and self promotion is Henry Gibson's Haven Hamilton. Hamilton is the most easily recognizable character to the internal audience of the film, and Altman gives the external audience the impression that Hamilton is a veteran of the country music industry through the connections within country music that the audience sees Hamilton exploit.

Hamilton exists as the archetypal old guard country star as described in Bill C. Malone's *Country Music, USA*. The early country music star was expected to have some type of roots in rural America. It is important to note that these roots were not necessarily real roots. For example, Jimmie Rodgers, who Malone calls the "first country singing star," is claimed as a native son by the state of Texas, where he was most popular. However, he is not a native Texan.³⁴ During the 1930s in particular, the country music world paid special attention to those who cultivated this "down-home" image and who managed to keep their rural, everyman or everywoman appeal. The trick, with regard to the promotion of these images, is to not project the image of promotion.

According to Malone, the ideal country star has a balance of accessibility, the ability to identify with the core fan group, and the ability to balance self promotion with

the appearance of a lack of interest in self promotion.³⁵ The country star must be able to project an appearance that s/he not only understands country music fans, but is essentially one of them. This identifiability as a member of the country music community is essential to being able to construct the country music star persona.³⁶

Haven Hamilton is the best, most readily identifiable example of the established country music star. Altman first introduces Hamilton by showing him recording a hyper-patriotic country anthem commemorating the American bicentennial. When the external audience is introduced to Haven Hamilton, he is recording a song that sounds very much like a country standard. The style of music establishes him as a member of this old guard of country music. Another way in which Altman establishes Hamilton as an example of a classic country music personality, and an as established figure within the Nashville statusphere, is Hamilton's interaction with those who work for him but are outside of his particular statusphere. During the recording of "We Must Be Doing Something Right," Hamilton stops the recording and is critical of Richard Baskin's Frog, a studio musician. He tells Frog to "get a haircut" and that he doesn't "belong in Nashville." While Hamilton is the archetypal country music star, Frog exists more as a stereotype of rock music culture of the early 1970s.³⁷ His hair is long, he wears brightly colored shirts while recording in the studio, and he wears sunglasses inside while recording. Hamilton's reaction to Frog is the earliest indicator that Hamilton is an established personality within the country music community. Hamilton establishes the power that he has over Frog and demonstrates this power by kicking Frog out of the studio, ostensibly

because Frog has an appearance that runs contrary to Hamilton's idea of what Nashville should be like.

However, it is not simply Frog's appearance that makes him offensive to Hamilton. Hamilton takes issue with the way that Frog plays music. He believes that Frog does not have the talent to make it in Nashville, because his musical background is not in the traditional Nashville style. Frog becomes another investigation by Altman of how the idea of talent is perceived and constructed. Frog may be a capable musician, but he does not suit what Haven Hamilton seeks in a musician. The result of this exchange is another one of Altman's open investigations of what it means to be talented, and how talent can affect one's status.

Altman also uses the country-folk trio of Tom, Bill, and Mary as a means of providing a contrast to Haven Hamilton. The trio, two of whom are married, combine many traditional and easily identifiable genre markers of country music with a style of personal appearance that is more characteristic of the 1960s counterculture. In particular, Keith Carradine's Tom has long hair and wears leather clothing and projects an image that is often described as "dirty" by various characters under their breath.

The establishment of a hierarchy within Nashville, at the top of which sits Haven Hamilton, is aided by the hierarchy's rejection of the alternative style represented by Tom, Bill, and Mary. While both the trio's music and Tom's solo work are enormously popular within the fan community, these artists are marginalized by Hamilton and those within his statusphere. The establishment of Hamilton as this type of country music

figure affords him to be a particular kind of power broker, not only within the old guard of country music, but within Nashville as a whole.

Hamilton's status as a power broker within the Nashville statusphere is most apparent when he deals with two women in the film: Barbara Jean and Connie White. While there are many personalities within Hamilton's old guard statusphere, the two who are the most prominent are Karen Black's Connie White and Ronee Blakeley's Barbara Jean. Both of these women are dressed similarly to Haven Hamilton, with showy, flowing gowns. Both characters appeal to a similar group of people; namely, those for whom more traditional country music is most likely to be appealing. However, the characters exist in something of an unspoken rivalry. Subsequent to Barbara Jean's breakdown, Haven Hamilton states that he will appear onstage with her, but not with Connie White. Hamilton has no qualms about introducing Connie White onstage, as he demonstrates by introducing her prior to her performance as a substitute for Barbara Jean at the Grand Ole Opry. However, Hamilton states plainly that he will not appear on stage with Connie White as a performer.

Hamilton does not wish to appear onstage with Connie White because she is willing to engage in clear self promotion. He even goes as far as to damn her with faint praise, introducing her at the Grand Ole Opry by saying she is a great singer "in her own way." The implication here is that she is not a true country personality. She is rejected because her concern is becoming a successful country music star and she is unafraid to self-promote. Unlike Barbara Jean and Haven Hamilton, Connie White does not attempt to hide her ambition or her willingness to self-promote. Ultimately, this willingness to

appear as though she is self-promoting causes her to be situated below Hamilton and Barbara Jean in Hamilton's statusphere.

Barbara Jean and Haven Hamilton both consider themselves legitimate or authentic country musicians because they refuse to engage in the sort of self promotion in which, by Altman's Koestlerian "implication," Connie White engages. While listening to Connie White's performance at the Grand Ole Opry, Barbara Jean bemoans the fact that her husband will attend a party later with Connie White. In particular, Barbara Jean reacts with disgust at the idea of her husband hobnobbing with influential people within the Nashville statusphere. Barbara Jean clearly understands the value of this hobnobbing, and understands that it is a vital way of self-promoting. However, both she and her husband balk at the idea of, as her husband states, "hob-knobbing with them [sic] phonies." It is important to note here that while Barbara Jean's objection to hobnobbing appears genuine, the husband actually seems to relish the thought of being able to promote the image of Barbara Jean. He does not have to adhere to the image of the country music star, because it is instead his job to be a promoter.

Altman creates an important bisociative relationship that centers on Barbara Jean and Haven Hamilton. Both disdain self-promotion as a concept, and yet they allow their images to be promoted. Conversely, Connie White's unwillingness to disguise her interest in self-promote inhibits her ability to ascend the status ladder.

Altman constructs promotion as something that is often reciprocal. Barbara Jean's status is achieved in part from her relationship to Haven Hamilton. Hamilton is not the sole vehicle promotion for Barbara Jean, but he is nevertheless important.

Similarly, Barbara Jean is an important vessel for Hamilton's promotion. Hamilton's willingness to go onstage only with Barbara Jean is important to Barbara Jean's ability to operate in the Nashville statusphere. Because he is an influential power broker, Hamilton's name recognition can bring Barbara Jean to a performance. At the same time, Barbara Jean is the most popular personality in Nashville. The fact that Haven Hamilton can get Barbara Jean to appear onstage with him is a demonstration of how influential he is in Nashville.

While characters like Barbara Jean and Haven Hamilton examine the relationship between talent, status, and promotion, Sueleen Gay (played by Gwenn Welles) represents an extreme example of the promotion culture in Nashville. Sueleen promotes herself (and is promoted by Ned Beatty's Delbert Reese) as a "sexier version of Barbara Jean."³⁸ During a performance in a nightclub, she introduces a song she will sing by saying, "Hi, y'all, I'm going to perform one that Barbara Jean wrote." Sueleen tries to fashion an image that is as close to Barbara Jean's as possible. Unlike Barbara Jean, however, Sueleen has virtually nothing to offer Nashville that can be marketed in terms of talent. In addition to a lack of talent, she also lacks Barbara Jean's characteristic gentility. At one club where she is singing, several of the male characters suggested that she take her clothes off and dance (which she does.) Altman uses Sueleen to suggest that there is a thin line between a relationship that is between promoter and promoted and one that is between a pimp and a whore. Sueleen's lack of talent means that all she has is promotion, and the only way that Altman sees her able to promote herself is through her body.

Altman uses these three women to establish a continuum with regard to the relationship between talent, status, and promotion. At one end sits Barbara Jean. The quintessential country star, Barbara Jean effortlessly blends her natural talent with Malone's constructed image. Connie White shares much of Barbara Jean's talent. Unlike Barbara Jean, Connie White embraces the appearance of being self-promoting. She sits somewhere in the middle of this continuum. At the other end of the continuum, as far from Barbara Jean as possible, is Sueleen Gay. Her lack of talent casts Sueleen as figure who is pure promotion.

Haven Hamilton's concept of this continuum, which is different from Altman's, allows Altman to offer two competing views of this continuum. While Connie White sits at some point on this continuum between the other two women, Altman and Hamilton have differing concepts of which woman she is closer to. Hamilton's disdain for her willingness to self-promote causes him to see her as being closer to Sueleen than to Barbara Jean. On the other hand, Altman seems to think that the difference between Connie White and Barbara Jean is smaller than the difference between Connie White and Sueleen. Altman does not have the same bisociative relationship to the Nashville statusphere that Haven Hamilton does, so the disdain he may have is for the status system, rather than Connie White's interest in self-promotion.

Altman treats the major stars of *Nashville* as if their self-promotion is bisociative. The stars react with what seems to be genuine interest to the attention from their fans, but only so long as is necessary to maintain their images. For example, Connie White has a confrontation with a fan before one of her shows, and she is initially very receptive to the

attention she receives from the fan. However, as the fan becomes more persistent, Connie becomes more dismissive. The fan begins to offer songs that she has written as suggestions for Connie to record. Connie's response is to repeatedly thank the fan for being a fan, while not acknowledging the fan's desire to have the songs recorded. This particular type of dismissal of a fan's ideas undercuts the idea that Connie's love for her fans is genuine.

In addition to his treatment of Connie White, Altman's treatment of Haven Hamilton in particular suggests that Hamilton's promotion is also not always of a genuine nature. Hamilton cultivates the persona of a man who understands and sympathizes with country music fans, because he is just like them. However, Altman exposes this image Hamilton promotes as disingenuous. John Triplette, played by Michael Murphy, is a regional director for the Hal Phillip Walker campaign. During the course of the film, he moves around Nashville, looking to secure acts for a country music festival, which will also serve as a campaign rally for the third party candidate for President. He remarks to several characters, including both Haven Hamilton and Bill (of Tom, Bill and Mary,) that the idea of using country music is appealing to Walker because the "yokels" and "rednecks" will, as Triplette suggests, "eat this stuff up." While Triplette's assertion is merely an attempt to manipulate people into voting for his candidate, it is important to note that both of the country music personalities with which he shares his idea actually agree with him. These statements certainly further undermine the apparent authenticity of country music artists. However, these statements serve another important function within Altman's critique. The stars' acknowledgement of (and agreement with) what

Triplette says show that they are knowingly complicit in the sale of a product that is at least partially inauthentic. Altman uses the possibility of the disingenuousness of Haven Hamilton as a means of suggesting that the self-righteousness of Hamilton's entire statusphere can be called into question.

While Haven Hamilton may be the closest character to a personification of status, presidential candidate Hal Philip Walker is a character who embodies promotion. Walker is a third party candidate who is running in the 1976 presidential election. In creating Walker, Altman set the goal of creating a character that said "the stuff politicians don't say, so we might actually be interested in it."³⁹ Walker's campaign vans drive around the streets of Nashville, blasting out of a loudspeaker his message that paints him as an alternative to mainstream politics. Walker exists only in the vans, campaign flyers, and news reports that are a part of the *mise-en-scene* of the film. While both the characters in the film and the audience are being bombarded with information about Hal Philip Walker, Walker is never seen, and he exists more as an idea of a presidential candidate than as an actual candidate.⁴⁰ The conspicuous lack of an actual person portraying Hal Philip Walker is meant to drive home the idea of promoting a president.⁴¹ It is not so much that the character of the man is unimportant, or that he may be dishonest in his pursuit of the presidency. Hal Philip Walker is a character who exists only as a promotion.

Conclusion

In *Nashville*, Altman exposes the relationship between talent, promotion and status. Those who are successful within the country music statusphere must combine

talent with the ability to be willing to be promoted while simultaneously appearing to reject that same promotion. Successfully navigating the Nashville statusphere necessitates believing that one is as talented as one's status indicates, while also cultivating an image that is an intentionally inaccurate representation of one's true personality. This is part of Altman's bisociative paradox – characters regard themselves with a sense of irony, and yet at the same time often believe the hype surrounding their promoted image.

The 1970s also establish, for the first time, where Altman sees himself in the American film statusphere. *M*A*S*H** and *McCabe* were Altman's first commercial successes, but their subversion of traditional genres and statuspheres established a reputation for being something of a radical filmmaker.⁴² *Nashville* did nothing to dispel that reputation, and perhaps cemented it in his own mind. The self-reflexivity with regard to promotion suggests that Altman identifies his career with that of Connie White. Both are talented, and both are willing to outwardly promote in ways that resist the traditions of their respective industries.

Highbrow and Middlebrow: Conflict in *Short Cuts*

Altman's 1980s films diverged significantly from his interest in exploring America as a statusocracy. Following the critical success of *Nashville* and other films of the mid 1970s, Altman's career took something of a dive, bottoming out critically, commercially, and artistically with 1979's *Quintet*. This Paul Newman driven post-apocalyptic thriller was centered on a game played by the characters in an environment most closely resembling a nuclear winter. Altman centers the action on the game (a game he invented and marketed as a companion to the film) as part of a larger game metaphor he associated with the film. According to Altman, the film existed as a game on several levels; from his primarily European cast, to the game itself, to Paul Newman's solitary character's relationship to his snowy environment as a metaphor for Altman's somewhat frosty relationship to the major studios of the mid to late 1970s.⁴³ This antagonistic relationship carried itself well into the 1980s, as Altman shifted his focus away from investigations of status and toward projects in which he focused on the interactions between characters in private relationships. Altman seemed to be making films that were in direct contrast to what a studio executive might want in a film, even going so far as to make 1980's *Popeye*, which was "a musical without professional singers and dancers, a comedy without jokes, and a fantasy with a minimum of special effects."⁴⁴ Altman filmed a series of plays, created a TV series, and was largely out of the American cinematic limelight until the early 1990s.

1993's *Short Cuts* builds upon some of the concepts that Altman established with his films in the 1970s. In *Short Cuts*, Altman shifts his primary focus away from the

manner in which individuals accrue status. Instead, he focuses more on the conflicts between status groups. In particular, Altman is concerned with exploring the relationship between high brow statuspheres and middlebrow statuspheres. Altman also examines the way in which people engage in self promotion in a private context (rather than the public context of the country music industry) in early 1990s Los Angeles. In *Short Cuts*, the ideas of promotion and storytelling begin to merge. Altman's concept of promotion becomes less about the selling of a public image, and more about the projection of an image privately. Many of the characters in *Short Cuts* are delusional about themselves in some way with regard to their status. Consequently, these characters tell stories about themselves with varying degrees of truth. Altman negotiates these stories that people tell about themselves, often with an eye toward determining both the degree to which these stories are accurate and the degree to which these people's places within their own statuspheres are a function of their ability to tell a story.

Much like *Nashville*, *Short Cuts* also introduces a bisociative paradox. In *Short Cuts*, Altman problematizes the concept of middlebrow culture. In particular, Altman examines how particular aspects of middlebrow culture aspire to become highbrow. Within Altman's high- and middlebrow status structures, lack of status consciousness is a necessary component of participating in the highbrow statusphere. While an entity within the middlebrow statusphere (either a person or a cultural formation, such as a group of producers of a certain type of music) may aspire to become highbrow, it is, ironically, that very aspiration that necessarily prevents middlebrow people or cultural forms from ascending the status ladder.

Short Cuts departs from *Nashville* not only in the manner of promotion which Altman examines, but also in the role that the formal elements of the film play in Altman's investigations of status. Apart from the opening montage in *Nashville*, that film's formal elements have little relationship to the ways in which Altman constructs status. In *Short Cuts*, as well as 1992's *The Player* (which served as a formal template for some of the visual components of *Short Cuts*), the formal components of the film become more important to Altman's investigation, particularly in the way he tells his stories.

Formal Storytelling

It is through the formal elements of the film that Altman first introduces the bisociative paradox of middlebrow culture. Altman constructs cultural formations within the middlebrow statusphere as possessing the desire to gain highbrow status. However, the paradox of highbrow status that Altman creates is the lack of status consciousness on the part of the highbrows: in order to be highbrow, one must reject the concept of ascending the statusphere. This paradox manifests itself first in Altman's construction of the film. On the one hand, Altman understands that he is making a film, an art form that is decidedly middlebrow in status. At the same time, some of his methods of constructing his films suggest, as Alan Karp states, that Altman has the desire to be received as a "serious artist"⁴⁵ within the highbrow statusphere.

Altman himself struggles with the distinction between highbrow and middlebrow, particularly within the context of film as an art form. *Short Cuts* is based upon a series of unrelated stories written by Raymond Carver in the 1970s. Carver's stories are highbrow

works, particularly because of the style. Much of Carver's work is minimalist, with the responsibility for filling in the "gaps" of the story resting upon the reader. In order to take these stories and mold them into a coherent film, Altman integrates the stories together; the stories become intercut, so that each story can be followed chronologically. These cuts are the foundation of the self-awareness of the film.⁵ Altman understands that, because of its lack of cultural longevity, film is a middlebrow form of art. Through his stitching together of the stories of the highbrow author Raymond Carver, Altman demonstrates his own concern with becoming highbrow.

In *Short Cuts*, the cuts from one scene to the next often establish a relationship between two scenes. These cuts are Altman's type of tongue-in-cheek "matching" one scene to the next. For example, during an argument between Ralph (Matthew Modine) and Julianne Moore's Marian Wyman about the economic merits of various artists, the camera lingers on one of Marian's paintings of a nude woman. The camera then cuts to the nude form of a woman found in a river by Stuart Caine (Fred Ward) and his fishing buddies after she had been murdered. There is no connection between the stories that Altman has connected, save the familiarity between some of the characters. Altman has established a visual connection between the two scenes. This visual connection also serves as a reminder of the status difference between the two groups of people. The

⁵ This self-awareness is not unique to *Short Cuts*, and is in fact rooted both in *Nashville* and 1992's *The Player*. *The Player* begins with a tracking shot that encompasses the credit sequence while introducing many of the characters that are present on a movie studio lot. During this tracking shot, Fred Ward's character begins discussing what he believes to be the greatest tracking shots in all of film. For viewers who know what a tracking shot is, this discussion serves as something of an inside joke that lets the viewers know that the film is somehow self aware of its status as a film. The cuts in *Short Cuts* work in a similar way.

viewer is effectively jarred from the highbrows (Marian Wyman) to the non-highbrows (Caine and the fisherman.)

The visual connection extends through this scene as Caine and his compatriots ignore the body of the dead woman and continue to fish. Altman's camera focuses on a particular fish, and then proceeds to cut from this scene to the next, where Robert Downey, Jr.'s Bill and Lili Taylor's Honey Bush are looking into the fish tank of the friends from whom they are apartment sitting. Again, the viewers are made aware of status distinctions. In this instance, Altman cuts from a fish to another medium close, this time of the Bushes, who spend a significant percentage of their time onscreen at the apartment of their friends; an apartment that is an indicator of their neighbors high status.

The commonalities within these three scenes serve to highlight the distinctions between the statuspheres. These self-conscious and tongue-in-cheek cuts serve as a method of creating a sequence of events running through the various stories that is easy for the viewer to interpret. This cognizance of the storytelling serves as a bridge from this film to 2001's *Gosford Park*, where the relationship between Altman's storytelling and the storytelling of the characters becomes more intertwined.

The cuts from story to story also draw attention to the statuspheric relationships. Altman begins the cut by first showing Zane Cassidy's Casey Finnigan medium close while drinking a glass of milk. Rather than stay on the boy's face, the camera pans over to a nightstand, upon which the boy has placed his cup. The camera zooms tight onto the glass of the milk, and Finnigan knocks the glass over. As the glass falls, the scene cuts to a small old television in need of repair, on which is footage of a glass of milk being

spilled. The camera then pans across the house of Jerry and Lois Kaiser (Chris Penn and Jennifer Jason Leigh.) The relatively small abode with minimal furniture allows the cut between milk glasses to serve as another reminder of the change in statuspheres. This cut, like the fish cuts, serves to highlight the difference between the statuspheres.

Altman's interest in film ascending to highbrow status is not unique to *Short Cuts*. In his preceding film, 1992's *The Player*, Griffin Mill (Tim Robbins) stands at an awards banquet and gives an impassioned speech in which he discusses the necessity of film being considered as "more than entertainment." At a gala event for filmmakers, Mill says,

[The Los Angeles County Museum of Art has] long fostered the art of motion pictures as a serious and valuable art form in this community. Many people across the country and around the world for too long thought of the movies as a popular entertainment more than serious art. And I'm afraid a large part of the press supports this attitude. We want great films, with long shelf lives, we want the films of the new John Hustons, Orson Welleses, and Frank Capras. We and the other major film studios have a responsibility to the public, to maintain the art of motion pictures...movies are art; now, more than ever.

On the one hand, there is nothing to suggest that Mill is speaking with Altman's voice. The fact that a director uses the voice of a particular character does not mean that that character is taking on the director's voice.⁶ That being said, many of the sentiments about film expressed by Griffin Mill in *The Player* mirror the struggles through which Altman attempts to elevate film to a highbrow cultural formation.⁴⁶

Status in Short Cuts

In *Short Cuts*, the accumulation and "spending" of cultural capital appears, to those in the middlebrow statusphere, to be the door into the highbrow statusphere.

⁶ According to Robert T. Self, Altman always considered his actors the "primary artists." Because of this, he tended to prefer adlibbed dialogue. This speech was written, not adlibbed by Tim Robbins. (see endnote 39.)

However, this belief ignores what is, in Altman's view, one of the essential components of highbrow status – lack of status consciousness.⁴⁷ For example, the physician Ralph Wyman attempts to gain highbrow status through the accumulation of cultural capital. Cultural capital is acquired in *Short Cuts* through an increase in interaction with various types of media or art. The goal is not so much to learn about this art as to consume it. In the instance of Ralph Wyman,⁷ the accumulation of cultural capital is vital to retaining his status in the social world of medicine and his attempts to climb out of the middlebrow statusphere, and thus his attendance at the concert is necessary to foster the accumulation of cultural capital.⁴⁸

In *Short Cuts*, Altman uses groups of two people (often married couples, but not always) as a means of illustrating the contrast between highbrow and middlebrow statuspheres. In these relationships, the middlebrow character often displays some level of status insecurity. Altman uses the Wyman family as an example of two people who are very close but operate in different statuspheres. Marian Wyman⁸ is an artist who is married to Dr. Ralph Wyman.⁴⁹ The couple meets Claire (Anne Archer) and Stuart Caine at a cello recital, and the differences between the Dr. and Mrs. Wyman become immediately apparent. Marian and Claire notice popular celebrity Alex Trebeck at the concert, and this common interest of theirs sparks a conversation amongst the two couples, which ultimately leads to an invitation to dinner. In contrast to the women, Ralph Wyman has a different attitude about Trebeck and the Caines.

⁷ According to Self, Altman's films frequently "demonstrate the remarkable fertility of social motivation." However, Self does not address the accumulation of status markers and cultural capital.

⁸ Self discusses how Altman establishes his women within the context of "contradictory formations of power." However, Self ignores the possibility that women (particularly Marian Wyman) could be a type of cultural capital.

In keeping with her highbrow status that stems from her career as an artist, Marian Wyman is unconcerned with the appearance of being high status. The Caines do not have the same cultural standing as the Wymans. The Caines are working class (Claire is a clown, and Stuart is a salesman) and their status elicits different reactions from Marian and Ralph. Marian seems unconcerned with the status of the Caines. She argues to Ralph that they seem to be nice people, and that this should be sufficient for friendship. In contrast, Ralph's reaction to the Caines implies that he believes his attempts to raise his status will be hurt if he is associating himself with people outside of his desired statusphere. When Marian invites the Caines over for dinner, Ralph asks his wife, "Why did you do that?" The Wymans proceed to debate who invited the Caines, with Ralph asking once again, "Why did you invite them to dinner?"

Similarly, Ralph makes a point of not noticing Alex Trebeck. While both Marian Wyman and the Caines notice Trebeck and comment on his presence, Ralph Wyman acts as though he does not know who Trebeck is. This self-proclaimed lack of knowledge about Trebeck is undercut later in the film. During the dinner to which the Caines have been invited by the Wymans, the couples engage in a board game version of *Jeopardy!* The fact that the Wymans own this game suggests that Wyman has some knowledge of Alex Trebeck. His self-professed inability to recognize Trebeck is exposed as an attempt to seem highbrow by being detached from middlebrow culture.

This difference in the view of the statuspheres is also established in the different ways in which the Wymans engage high-brow and middle-brow culture. Marian is engaged with middle-brow popular culture, because it does not threaten her highbrow

status. While she has some degree of interest in the concert, she is at least similarly fascinated by the presence of Alex Trebeck, a pop-culture icon. At the same time, Marian is an artist who is more concerned with the critical reception her work gets than its marketability. During the course of the film, she is seen painting a number of paintings, particularly female nudes. She also has conversations with both her sister and her husband about her art. During the conversation about art, Ralph reveals that he sees art simply as a commodity. He suggests that Mitchell Anderson, a former acquaintance of Marian's, was a failure as an artist because of his inability to sell any of his paintings. Ralph refers to him as, "The lousy painter, the one who never sold anything – Mitchell Anderson." This is a sentiment expressed by other lowbrow or middlebrow characters. Tim Robbins' police officer Gene Sheppard scoffs at the notion that Alex Trebeck might purchase one of Marian's paintings, simply because he believes that she does not sell very well and therefore is not a good artist. His wife, Sherri (Madeline Stowe,) says that, "[Trebeck] might buy one of [Marian's] paintings," to which her husband says, "Nah (sic) I don't think so. I don't see how she could even give those things away." Much like Ralph Wyman, Gene Sheppard equates sales with artistic merit.

Ralph Wyman's attitudes about art and his presence at the concert raise an issue that is a prominent status related theme of the film. There is a conflict between the highbrow and middlebrow statuspheres that manifests itself through the types of music that characters listen to, as well as the places in which they listen to music. People who have some type of professional job (particularly Ralph Wyman,) or a job which necessitates attempting to reach the highbrow statusphere are shown as more likely to be

listening to classical music. This is also true of Alex Trebeck, who actually does some straddling of the line between highbrow status and middlebrow status. On the one hand, he is a popular figure, well known for his television program “Jeopardy.” As a result, he is popular with people who are members of the middlebrow statusphere. At the same time, he attends the same concert as the Wymans. He also considers purchasing one of Marian Wyman’s paintings. Because of his celebrity status, he is able to straddle the demarcation between these two statuspheres in a way that the other characters are not.

Alex Trebeck functions as one of several symbols that Altman uses to illustrate the attempts by middlebrow cultural forms to become highbrow. As a television game show host, Alex Trebeck has a definite place within the middlebrow statusphere. His profession is certainly middlebrow. However, it is not only his profession, but the medium in which he works that is identifiable as middlebrow. *Jeopardy!* is a game show not unlike most other game shows. However, it has a decidedly different appeal than the quiz shows that have been a staple of American television since the 1950s. However, with questions often focused on art and literature, *Jeopardy* aims to appeal to more than the middlebrow audience of television. While the show appeals to this audience, *Jeopardy!* also targets people who are either highbrow or have highbrow aspirations. Ostensibly, *Jeopardy!* is an attempt by television as a cultural form to apologize for its place in the middlebrow statusphere.

In contrast to those within the highbrow statusphere, Altman constructs a structure of association between the middlebrow and working class characters and jazz music. For example, Robert Downey, Jr.’s Bill Bush is a makeup artist who frequents a local jazz bar

with his wife, Honey, and a couple with whom they are friends. The use of a jazz bar (as opposed to a type of music more easily identifiable as popular) is another example of the attempt by people within the middlebrow statusphere to acquire cultural capital. Jazz, much like Alex Trebeck and *Jeopardy!*, is a historically middlebrow cultural form that has attempted to ascend the status ladder and, ultimately, become highbrow. This attempted transition began as early as 1930 with saxophonist Lester Young. A member of Count Basie's swing band, Young suggested to his fellow bandmates that they were "all belly," and that, perhaps unlike his bandmates, he was taking a more intellectual approach to his music. This inclination toward cerebral playing marks an attempt by bebop jazz musicians as an attempt to reinvent jazz as a more intellectual pursuit, rather than a more emotive one.⁵⁰ Bebop entertainers began to comport themselves onstage less as entertainers and more like serious classical musicians.⁵¹ This concern with appearance and with intellectual pursuit establishes the interest jazz musicians (and aficionados) have in elevating jazz to highbrow status.

The conflict between jazz and classical music as an example of cultural status conflict is typified⁵² by the Trainer family.⁹ The mother, Tess Trainer (played by Annie Ross,) is a jazz club singer who deludes herself with regard to her own talent and importance in the jazz world as she struggles for acceptance from her daughter. While Tess is hardly devoid of talent, she believes that her talent is being masked to some degree by the fact that she is "stuck" in Los Angeles because the Los Angeles scene does not lend her to being rediscovered. She suggests that the audiences in Los Angeles are

⁹ Self discusses the Trainers in terms of parallel structures, but ignores the status implications of the mother-daughter opposition.

only interested in “snorting coke and talking,” rather than hearing her sing. She deludes herself into blaming others for her current status as a has-been jazz singer.

By contrast, Trainer’s daughter, Lori Singer’s Zoe, is a classical cellist (the same cellist who performed at the recital that began the film,) who has a great deal more talent than her mother. Tess resents Zoe because Tess’s chosen method of musical expression is not universally accorded highbrow status. This conflict between mother and daughter is perhaps the best example of Altman’s concept of friction between levels of social status being manifested in this film.

As he demonstrated in *Nashville* with presidential candidate Hal Philip Walker, Altman often uses absurd and extreme examples as an illustration of his ideas about status. In *Short Cuts*, this excessive illustration that Altman constructs is more metaphorical in nature than Hal Philip Walker. It is also, rather than being an illustration of promotion, a caricature of the ways in which the people of Los Angeles delude themselves. In order to construct the character Altman wants, it was necessary for him to change certain elements of the personalities and circumstances of the particular character.

Altman’s over the top illustration of delusion takes the form of the motorcycle policeman Gene Sheppard. Sheppard is based primarily off upon Al, an employee of an aeronautics company and the first person narrator of Raymond Carver’s story “Jerry and Molly and Sam.” In the story, Al lies to his wife about the way the dog, Suzy, disappears. The dog had been driving Al crazy, and so to rid himself of this menace, he takes the dog to an adjoining neighborhood and drops it off. The changes from Carver’s Al that Altman makes are what transform him into the fantastic example of delusion.

When Al becomes Sheppard, the lies compound themselves to include a series of infidelities and an exaggerated sense of self-importance within the police department. As a form of bisociative storytelling, he tells his wife a number of (what she later says she knows to be) bald faced lies to cover for the affair he is having with a local woman.¹⁰ To create this cover, Sheppard manufactures an imaginary sting operation on which says he is working to bring down a gang of criminals responsible for selling crack cocaine to school teachers.

In the film's final sequence, Los Angeles experiences a minor earthquake. Sheppard takes his LAPD bullhorn out behind the house and orders people to stay in their homes and remain calm. These instructions are barely audible over the sound of the shaking of the ground, and thus they will not help anyone in any meaningful way. The stories that Sheppard told his wife, as well as his use of the bullhorn, have become a part of his self-delusion. Gene Sheppard's delusions and the stories he tells allow him to cope with his relatively low level of status. Sheppard is not the only character in his own house that Altman changes from Carver's template to fit his extreme example of delusion.

Altman also makes one significant change to Sheppard's wife. Altman constructs a link between two of Carver's stories by making Sherri Sheppard the sister of Marian Wyman. On the one hand, this link is one of many sutures that Altman uses to fuse Carver's stories together. However, this particular association also establishes a relationship between Sherri Sheppard and the highbrow statusphere. Through the use of

¹⁰ Self (84) describes the conversations between the Sheppards as arguments related to infidelity. This seems a slight misreading, as Sherri Sheppard seems uninterested in his infidelity and is more focused on the story itself.

a series of phone conversations between the sisters, Altman informs the audience Altman's insertion of a bridge between Mrs. Sheppard and the highbrow statusphere establishes the connection between Gene Sheppard and the middlebrow.

The Sheppards are not the only married couple engaging in a bisociative lie about the nature of their relationship. Marian has lied for years to her husband about being unfaithful at a party years earlier. During the course of a conversation with her husband, she ultimately reveals that she has, in fact, been unfaithful in the past. The initial lie serves to preserve her marriage, which ultimately serves to preserve Dr. Wyman's status. Marian's lie serves as a parallel to the self delusions with regard to status mobility. While there is certainly some element of guilt on Marian's part, her embrace of storytelling (and lying in particular) as a means of maintaining the marriage also serves to allow Ralph to maintain his fantasy of being a member of the status elite.

Conclusion

In *Short Cuts*, Altman's focus shifts away from the ways in which status is achieved. Instead, the film focuses on the conflict between highbrow statuspheres and middlebrow statuspheres. Altman's middlebrow characters have a paradoxical relationship with their own statusphere. His middlebrow characters are consumed with the goal of becoming entrenched in the highbrow statusphere. However, as he demonstrates through the attitudes of his highbrow characters, Altman's construction of the highbrow statusphere itself includes a lack of status consciousness. The Wyman sisters and Zoe Trainer have no real interest in ascending the status ladder, and this establishes them as being highbrow. In contrast, the middlebrow status seekers have

deluded themselves into thinking that they can move up this ladder through the accumulation of cultural capital. In reality, their desire to accumulate this cultural capital prevents them from ever being able to enter that statusphere.

Altman's interest in statuspheric conflict in this film once again mirrors where he sees himself in the American film statusphere. Much as the middlebrows of *Short Cuts* strive for some level of highbrow status, Altman is unsure of his place in the American film statusphere. The self-reflexivity of *Short Cuts* draws specific attention to the ways in which Altman appropriates highbrow art as an attempt to elevate his art from middlebrow to highbrow status.

Gosford Park

In *Gosford Park*, Altman reintroduces the theme of longevity versus newness that he applied peripherally in his previous films. This theme appeared to some extent in both *Nashville* (in the conflict between Haven Hamilton's statusphere and that of Tom, Mary, and Bill) and in *Short Cuts* (in the resistance to some forms of art becoming high brow.) In *Gosford Park*, the conflict between longevity and newness pervades all of the statuspheric relationships that Altman examines. Status in *Gosford Park* is very different than status in Altman's previous films. Because the film takes place in post-World War I England, status appears very similar to what Weber would define as class. The film is, in some ways, a classic upstairs/downstairs film that focuses on the interactions between England's wealthy elite (the "upstairs") and their servants (the "downstairs.") These two statuspheres are rigidly defined, and the film shows that it is virtually impossible to move from one statusphere to the other. And yet, within each statusphere, there is a hierarchy of status.

The "upstairs" statusphere is divided essentially in two substatuspheres – "old" money and "new" money. As their respective names suggest, the divisions within the "upstairs" statusphere are based upon how long they have had their wealth. Those who are part of the old money status hierarchy have most likely inherited their money (though some may have married into it.) People who are new money, on the other hand, have earned it in some way (either through business ventures or, in the case of characters such as Jeremy Northam's Ivor Novello, through a film career.)

Similarly, the “downstairs” statusphere exists as a place where status is accrued primarily through experience. With the downstairs statusphere, Altman is returning to one of the primary issues he explored in *Nashville* - the importance of talent in determining status. In *Gosford Park*, he equates talent with being good at one’s job. The downstairs statusphere is one of the few places in any of Altman’s films where there is a simple equation involving talent and status. The more “talented” (or experienced) you are, the higher your position within the statusphere.

Much as in *Short Cuts*, status is maintained through some form of storytelling. In *Gosford Park*, however, the stories that the characters tell about themselves are stories that conceal the truth, rather than the self-delusion present in *Short Cuts*. While it is difficult to move up quickly in one’s given statusphere, it is possible to lose one’s status rapidly within a statusphere. Status can be lost when other members of the statusphere learn that the stories one tells are untrue in some way. Therefore, status maintenance in *Gosford Park* takes the form of telling stories in a way that withholds information, rather than sharing information.

While Altman became more prolific (and commercially successful) during the 90s, it was not until 2000’s *Dr. T and the Women* that he began to return to his investigation of forms of status. *Dr. T* is the story of Sullivan Travis (Richard Gere,) a Dallas, TX, area gynecologist whose practice caters primarily to women of high status. However, the film drew criticism for its portrayal of these high status women,⁵³ and ultimately has very little to say about these women. Rather, the women are seen simply as manifestations of their status. These women have the goal of being seen in places of

high status. What is unusual about *Dr. T* is Altman's relative lack of commentary on these women. The women serve mostly as a manifestation of a group of people that Altman examines more closely in *Gosford Park* – people in the “new money” statusphere. *Dr. T and the Women* functions to introduce the concept of new money status to Altman's library.

Establishing Status Upstairs

Altman creates a delineation between old money and new money in the upstairs statusphere. The line he creates is, in many ways, a study of longevity – both cultural longevity and actual long life. People who are old money view those who have new money with some degree of contempt. This contempt manifests itself in the form of disgust on the part of those who are old money with the ways in which the new money characters try to fit into the old money statusphere.

Some of the old money characters, such as Michael Gambon's William McCordle (the head of the household where the film takes place) are simply indifferent to people with new money. In fact, McCordle largely ignores everyone in the film, regardless of their status. The character who best maintains the self-perceived superiority of old money status over new money status is Maggie Smith's Constance Trentham. Constance Trentham takes every possible opportunity to belittle or bemoan people who are a part of the new money statusphere. Trentham frequently interacts with Natasha Wightman's Lavinia Meredith, a younger woman who appears to have married into her money. Meredith wears the same dress at several functions during the course of the weekend, and this draws comments from Trentham. Trentham tells the women with whom she is

playing bridge that she “would not know what would possess someone to come for a weekend without more than one frock.” She makes the comment within earshot of Mrs. Meredith, and the implication that she makes is that, because Mrs. Meredith is new money, she does not properly understand how to behave around others who have money.

In addition to critiquing Meredith’s clothing, Trentham also demeans the chosen form of entertainment of the new money statusphere - film. The concern that Altman expresses in *Short Cuts* with regard to film as a high status form of art returns in *Gosford Park*. Bob Balaban’s Morris Weissman, a Hollywood film producer, has made the weekend trip to the McCordle household along with Ivor Novello, the star of a series of Hollywood films. Early in the film, Trentham asks Novello how it feels knowing that, because of medium in which he works, his career is unlikely to last for much more than the next, say ten years. Similarly, later in the film a group of the old money characters ask Weissman about his work.¹¹ Trentham tells Weissman that they’re asking him, because none of them are going to see the film, and she takes as an absurdity the suggestion that perhaps they should.

Once again, Altman is examining the role of film in the art statusphere. Whereas in *Short Cuts* Altman was concerned with trying to give film some highbrow legitimacy, in *Gosford Park* he suggests that those in high statuspheres believe that film is (or was) connected to the new money characters. Altman depicts film being harmed by its relative lack of cultural longevity.

¹¹ Weissman has come to McCordle’s to do research for a murder mystery that he is producing, which is supposed to take place in a setting very similar to the setting of *Gosford Park*.

Downstairs Status – Keep to Yourself

Status in the downstairs statusphere is based primarily upon job continuity. Thus, much as in the upstairs statusphere, hierarchy in the downstairs statusphere is based upon longevity. Within the context of the downstairs, Altman constructs status and influence as being established based upon who has the most experience waiting on those in the upstairs.

The way that status is rooted in experience downstairs makes it extraordinarily difficult for those who work downstairs to ascend the statusphere. However, Altman constructs the statusphere as a place where it is possible to lose one's status. Much like the characters in *Short Cuts*, the downstairs characters tell stories about themselves in order to prevent the loss of one's place in the statusphere.

Unlike the people of *Short Cuts*, the people downstairs tell are designed to withhold information, not to give it. This desire to withhold information starts at the top of the statusphere, with Alan Bates's Jennings, the head of the downstairs staff. While his status grows in part from the amount of experience he has in the McCordle household, he is also respected by the others for serving his country during World War I. During the film, it is revealed that he did not actually serve in the war. Instead, he was arrested as a conscientious objector, a fact which he has concealed from his fellow servants. When Jennings's deception is revealed, his primary concern is not that he may become

incarcerated¹²; he is worried about the way he will be viewed within the downstairs statusphere.

Altman also constructs the downstairs statusphere as a formation in which people who are concerned with doing their job well. Altman's downstairs characters, unlike their upstairs counterparts, are organized in a hierarchy that is based, at least in part, upon talent. Consequently, constructing the appearance of being concerned with doing one's job well is an essential component of establishing one's self downstairs. As long as someone does their work in an honorable way, their identity remains largely unquestioned. This is why Clive Owen's Robert Parks, who is something of a mysterious figure, is able to insinuate himself into the downstairs statusphere.

Parks creates an aura of mystery about himself, deflecting questions about his past as a means of maintaining his status. At one point in the film, when his past comes into question, he is very specific with his word choice. Mary Maceachran, a fellow member of the service statusphere (played by Kelly Macdonald), uncovers a part of Parks's reason for being at the McCordle home. Parks has come to the estate to kill McCordle, because McCordle is Parks's father, but Parks was abandoned and sent to an orphanage. Maceahran says to Parks, "You can't know who your father is. You said you were an orphan." Parks responds, saying "No I didn't. I said I grew up in an orphanage." Parks tells a story about himself that is partially true. This partial truth deflects enough questions to allow Parks to get close enough to McCordle.

¹² The film is not specific with regard to whether or not conscientious objection to a war is punishable by imprisonment. However, Jennings believes that it is possible he could go to jail. This concern, however, is secondary.

The character of Ryan Phillippe's Henry Denton establishes a bisociative paradox for analyzing the familiar problematic of the relationship between storytelling and status. Initially, Altman depicts Denton as a member of the downstairs statusphere like many of the other characters. He does his job diligently, and although he is a bit more interested in learning about the people of the statusphere (including an attempted sexual assault of Ms. Maceahran, which causes Maceahran to think that there is something unusual about Denton) he is largely left alone and allowed to do his job. However, the attitude that the other members of the downstairs statusphere have toward Denton changes when they learn that he is actually an actor working for Morris Weissman. After he is exposed as an inauthentic member of the downstairs statusphere, the other members of the statusphere treat him with disdain. On multiple occasions, he tries to go downstairs to interact with the servants, and he is turned away at the stairway. Later in the film, after his discovery, another servant, George (Richard E. Grant,) spills the coffee that he was serving Denton into Denton's lap, under the guise of accidentally losing control of the cup.

The downstairs statusphere's attitude toward Denton changes because he has breached a particular unspoken code of etiquette between the two statuspheres. Each statusphere is insular in some way. The upstairs statusphere, particularly the old money, resists the changes to the upstairs that the new money brings as a means of staving off the impending demise of their statusphere.⁵⁴ Altman's downstairs keeps their characteristic pride in their hard work as a means of ignoring their own social inferiority. Denton's ability to cross between these two insulated statuspheres is what draws the ire of the members of the downstairs statusphere.

Altman establishes two investigating police officers as storytellers representing each of the statuspheres. These police officers represent the archetypes of both statuspheres that Altman has created. During the latter half of the film, William McCordle is murdered in his study. Unlike the film, the investigation focuses primarily on members of the upstairs statusphere. Stephen Fry's Inspector Thompson, the investigating officer, questions almost every member of the upstairs statusphere, while ignoring those downstairs, arguing that they have no connection to the murdered man. While Thompson conducts interviews, he gathers very little actual evidence. The evidence gathering is left to Constable Dexter, Thompson's subordinate.

The character of Constable Dexter, played by Ron Webster, is established as an extension of the downstairs statusphere by the way in which he does his job very well and without complaint. Though it is not a part of Inspector Thompson's investigation, the Constable takes it upon himself to do some research on the servants of the McCordle household. It is Dexter who exposes many of the secrets of the downstairs, including the fact that Jennings was a conscientious objector during the First World War. At the scene of McCordle's death, it is Dexter who notices both a teacup that McCordle had shattered on the floor (which Thompson dismisses, saying "Dexter, they have people to clean that up") and the lack of blood around McCordle's stab wound. Thompson appears to dismiss both of these, and continues to question the social elite staying at the home. His unwillingness to consider the evidence that Dexter presents manifests the same upstairs status insularity as his interest in the only people he thinks could have any "connection" to McCordle.

By making the more highly ranked police officer less competent, Altman establishes the upstairs statusphere as having no relationship to merit. The constable is the police officer with ability, but it is the Inspector who has the rank, much as the members of the upstairs statusphere are largely members of that statusphere by birthright. Altman reintroduces rank in a similar way to the way rank exists in *M*A*S*H**. In both instances, the most talented people are not necessarily the people with the highest rank.

In most of Altman's films, he creates a character that is an absurd example of the point he is trying to get across. In *Nashville*, Hal Philip Walker was a presidential candidate who was pure promotion. In *Short Cuts*, the Sheppard family is an extreme metaphor for the differences between high and middlebrow status. In *Gosford Park*, Altman uses Morris Weissman to further examine the relationship between the upstairs/downstairs divide and the ways that these respective statuspheres police their own self-images through insularity.

If Constable Dexter is the epitome of the hard working, talented member of the somewhat more open downstairs statusphere, film producer Morris Weissman represents openness at its most absurd. He is naïve, particularly with regard to the way that the British system works. Weissman is visiting the McCordle household to do research for a murder mystery that he will film later that year. Shortly before the actual murder of McCordle, Weissman receives a phone call from a fellow producer in Los Angeles. During this phone call, Weissman describes the story he wants to tell, and the audience learns that he is in fact describing the film that they are watching. Weissman does not know that he is describing the murder of William McCordle. Altman cuts back and forth

between possible suspects for the killing and Weissman's phone conversation. As Weissman talks, Altman uses a mixture of slow tracking shots and close-ups, both emphasizing Weissman's turned back and thus his ignorance of the situation transpiring around him. This phone call is another example of Altman's use of bisociatives within his own films. The call also emphasizes the self-reflexivity of *Gosford Park*. Like the cuts in *Short Cuts* and the commercial for the film in *Nashville*, this phone call establishes that Altman wants his audience to know that he knows he's telling a story. The film that Weissman wants to make becomes a type of film within a film, although Weissman's film has yet to be made. The absurd character of Morris Weissman highlights the insularity of the upstairs statusphere. Using Weissman (the character who is the most "open" in terms of his attitudes about statuspheres) as the tool of the self-reflexivity suggests that Altman is once again coming down on the side of "newness," but in this film, he is doing it as a member of the old guard.

Conclusion

In his previous films, Altman created a world where the relationship between talent, storytelling, and status is increasingly complex. In *Gosford Park*, Altman explores how status is affected by the dynamic that exists between what is old and what is new. This old/new dynamic manifests itself not only in the upstairs statusphere (as old money and new money,) but in the downstairs statusphere as well.

The focus on longevity leads to a reassessment of the function of statuspheres by emphasizing their defensive insularity. These statuspheres delude themselves in order to preserve something about their identity. The upstairs statusphere, particularly the old

guard, has insulated itself from the so-called new money. This insulation has deluded the old money into thinking that they have some degree of invincibility, despite the implication that the influence of new money will ultimately eclipse old money's influence. Similarly, the downstairs statusphere deludes itself through their emphasis on hard and quality work. The job being done well must be a reward in and of itself as a means of distracting the members of this statusphere from the fact that they are social inferiors.

As these insulations show, the manner in which status is either achieved or maintained evolved as Altman's career progressed. In *Nashville*, status was both accrued and maintained through the promotion and self-promotion of one's abilities. With *Short Cuts*, Altman's concept of promotion had changed into a series of white lies that his characters told as a means of either maintaining their status or deluding themselves with regard to their status. In *Gosford Park*, the concept of self-promotion becomes self-protection.

Gosford Park represents a complicated turn in Altman's filmography. For the bulk of his career, he embraced "newness" in various forms. In the films that I have covered to this point, Altman tends to side with whatever cultural formation is newer and resists the cultural formations that have greater cultural longevity. By the time this film was finished, Altman had established a great deal of his own cultural longevity within the film statusphere.

Conclusion

With the release of *M*A*S*H** in 1970 and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* the following year, Robert Altman established himself as a director who was willing to turn a critical and satirical eye to most of the conventions of American film. It is in part for this reason that he made *Nashville*, a film which manifested not only Altman's interest in ideas of promotion and status within the United States, but shed some light on how Altman viewed himself in Hollywood. Altman's self-reflexivity, particularly the attempts to use the film as a promotion for the film itself, suggests a cognizance of wanting his career to be viewed as something more than a man who made films to buck trends. *Nashville's* lessons in status ascension, and particularly the character of Connie White, are as representative of his disdain for established statuspheres as his irreverent look at the military in *M*A*S*H**.

If *Nashville* is representative of Altman's rejection of entertainment industry statuspheres, *Short Cuts* shows Altman's concern with being considered an "artist." After a decade of dabbling in various projects such as the filming of stage production, Altman returned to major Hollywood productions determined to help push film into the highbrow art statusphere. However, Altman falls victim to a bisociative paradox he himself suggests. While the self-reflexivity of the film displays a certain cognizance of highbrow culture, it also betrays the very status consciousness that prevents Altman from becoming a highbrow artist.

In some ways, Altman reasserts his ideas from *Nashville* in *Gosford Park*. Altman is still critical of established statuspheres. He still condemns them while

constructing a favorable view of newness relative to longevity. However, by the time *Gosford Park* was released, Altman was a member of the top of the American film statusphere. By the end of his career, Altman maintained the irreverent disregard for the highest statuspheres that he demonstrated in *M*A*S*H** and *Nashville*. In *Gosford Park*, that irreverence comes from within the statusphere, rather than a man trying to claw his way up the rungs of Hollywood's status ladder.

Beyond this thesis, there is precious little scholarship on the films Altman released after the 1970s. Perhaps because he was seen in many ways as a quintessential 1970s filmmaker, scholars felt that his later works were somehow less worthy of study. Hopefully, this work will begin to change that perception. *Short Cuts* is a fantastic example of the recent American trend of filmmaking that interweaves several disparate stories into a single narrative. The use of Alex Trebeck, within the context of Altman's frequent use of pop culture icons, holds promise for further research. The possibilities for *Gosford Park* are substantial as well. In many ways, *Gosford Park* is the archetypal Altman film. It defies and parodies a genre, is self-reflexive, and contains a variety of formal tricks, from overlapping dialogue to a constantly moving camera. Altman's films he made after the 1970s were still influential and worthy of study. The academic attention paid to them did not reflect this.

Endnotes

- ¹ Sean Wilentz. *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*. (New York; Oxford University Press, 1984.) 17
- ² Max Weber. "Class, Status, and Party." *Essays in Economic Sociology*, Richard Swedberg, ed. (Princeton, NJ; Princeton University Press, 1999.) 83.
- ³ Weber, 83-84.
- ⁴ Weber, 88.
- ⁵ Weber, 88.
- ⁶ Weber, 89.
- ⁷ Weber, 84.
- ⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1984.) p 54.
- ⁹ Bourdieu, 13.
- ¹⁰ Thomas L. Hartshorne. "Tom Wolfe on the 1960's." *Tom Wolfe*. Harold Bloom, ed. (Philadelphia, Chelsea House, 2001.) 88.
- ¹¹ James N. Stull. "The Cultural Gamesmanship of Tom Wolfe." *Tom Wolfe*. Harold Bloom, ed. (Philadelphia, Chelsea House, 2001.)
- ¹² Hartshorne, 89
- ¹³ Hartshorne, 89
- ¹⁴ Hartshorne, 89
- ¹⁵ Belgrad, Daniel. *The Culture of Spontaneity*. (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1998.) 233.
- ¹⁶ Lynes, Russell. "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow." *Harper's*. 1949. 19
- ¹⁷ Belgrad, 234.
- ¹⁸ Belgrad, 234.
- ¹⁹ Karp, 3-4.
- ²⁰ Koestler, 87.
- ²¹ David Gerstner. "The Practices of Authorship." *Authorship and Film*. (New York: Routledge, 2002.) Pp 8-9.
- ²² Jan Stuart. *The Nashville Chronicles: The Making of Robert Altman's Masterpiece*. (New York; Simon & Schuster, 2000.) p. 16
- ²³ Kevin J. Hayes. "Godard's Comment Ça Va? (1976): From Information Theory to Genetics." *Cinema Journal*. Volume 41, Issue 2 2002
- ²⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin. "From the prehistory of novelistic discourse." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. (Austin, TX; University of Texas Press, 1981.)
- ²⁵ James Phelan. *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. (Ithaca, NY; Cornell University Press, 2005.) pp 49-50.
- ²⁶ Michael W. Smith. *Understanding Unreliable Narrators*. (Madison, WI; NCTE Publishing, 1991.) 17.
- ²⁷ Alan Karp, *The Films of Robert Altman*. (London; Scarecrow Publishing, 1981.) p. 65.
- ²⁸ Keyssar, 65
- ²⁹ Keyssar, 65-68
- ³⁰ Keyssar, 81
- ³¹ David Breskin. *Inner Views: Filmmakers in Conversation*. (New York; Da Capo Press 1997.) 167
- ³² Breskin, 167-169.
- ³³ Karp, 52.
- ³⁴ Bill C. Malone. *Country Music, USA*. (Austin, TX; University of Texas Press, 2002.) p 89.
- ³⁵ Malone, 120.
- ³⁶ Malone, 120.

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- ³⁷ Karp, 57.
- ³⁸ Karp, 56.
- ³⁹ Robert Altman, *Altman on Altman*. David Thompson, ed. (London; Faber and Faber, 2005) p 93.
- ⁴⁰ Connie Byrne and William O. Lopez, "Nashville" *Robert Altman Interviews*. David Sterrit, ed. (Jackson, MS; University of Mississippi Press, 2000.) p 22.
- ⁴¹ Karp, 52.
- ⁴² Altman, 67.
- ⁴³ Altman, 115-116.
- ⁴⁴ Altman, 120
- ⁴⁵ Karp, 7.
- ⁴⁶ Robert T. Self, *Robert Altman's Subliminal Reality*. (Minneapolis, MN; University of Minnesota Press, 2002.) pp xv-xvi.
- ⁴⁷ Bourdieu, p 54-55.
- ⁴⁸ Self, 55.
- ⁴⁹ Self, 11.
- ⁵⁰ Belgrad, 179.
- ⁵¹ Belgrad, 183.
- ⁵² Self, 56.
- ⁵³ Altman, 191.
- ⁵⁴ Altman, 192.

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