

McCabe & Mrs. Miller

By Chelsea Wessels

In a 1971 interview, Robert Altman describes the story of “McCabe & Mrs. Miller” as “the most ordinary common western that’s ever been told. It’s every event, every character, every western you’ve ever seen.”¹ And yet, the resulting film is no ordinary western: from its Pacific Northwest setting to characters like “Pudgy” McCabe (played by Warren Beatty), the gunfighter and gambler turned businessman who isn’t particularly skilled at any of his occupations. In “McCabe & Mrs. Miller,” Altman’s impressionistic style revises western events and characters in such a way that the film reflects on history, industry, and genre from an entirely new perspective.

The opening of the film sets the tone for this revision: Leonard Cohen sings mournfully as the camera tracks across a wooded landscape to a lone rider, hunched against the misty rain. As the unidentified rider arrives at the settlement of Presbyterian Church (not much more than a few shacks and an unfinished church), the trees practically suffocate the frame and close off the landscape. At the sight of the buildings, the rider awkwardly shrugs off his heavy fur coat and retrieves a hat from his saddlebag to complete a dapper suit, muttering angrily under his breath. This small performance reveals the revision of a familiar story: a lone rider arrives at the edge of civilization with transformative goals. But here, the rider is hardly a confident man, as McCabe’s anxiety is palpable as the miners begin to emerge and take notice of him. He wants the men to believe he is “Pudgy” McCabe, the legendary gunfighter turned gambler – “the man who shot Bill Roundtree” – but the early moments of the film set up the insecurities that will ultimately cause his demise.

McCabe’s inability to manage the women he brings in to launch his saloon leads to the arrival of an unlikely partner: Constance Miller. Mrs. Miller immediately emasculates McCabe as she out-eats and out-thinks him over their breakfast meeting and subsequently virtually takes over the business. Together, McCabe and Mrs. Miller pursue their dreams of “striking it rich” in Presbyterian Church under the banner of Manifest Destiny, yet each is thwarted by their circumstances. McCabe is unable to distinguish bluster from threat



Mrs. Miller (Julie Christie) and saloon owner McCabe (Warren Beatty) swap ideas for striking it rich. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

when a mining company offers to buy him out and Mrs. Miller is ultimately a captive to his choices, unable (and perhaps unwilling) to save McCabe from his own insecurities and herself from her opium addiction. The nuances of these characters, and the performances by Beatty and Julie Christie, build greater complexity beyond what Altman calls “every character” in the western.

The landscape and characters converge in the role of the film’s production, a key element in considering “McCabe & Mrs. Miller.” Moving all the crew and actors to the remote setting in British Columbia, Altman had the set built from scratch according to specific historical parameters. Cast and crew lived in the buildings, which gradually emerged as the town of Presbyterian Church that is built up throughout the film. As Janet Walker and Richard Slotkin have argued, “the western is history,” but its representations onscreen often sketch a particular history that focuses on broad themes, rather than lived experience.² In bringing the cast and crew to the west (and, specifically, the Pacific Northwest), Altman focuses on history lived out in the minute details of daily existence in the Pacific Northwest in 1901.

History also crucially plays out in considering how these lived historical experiences echo the cultural moment of production in 1971. The film is often referred to as an “anti-western” for the way it clearly echoes the countercultural movements of its produc-

tion era. Robert T. Self notes that the film explores “the role of myth in the sustenance of American identity, the economic exploitations of corporate capitalism, the power of desire within the sublime of nature and the seduction of drugs, the potential of artistic discourse within the mass productions of Hollywood.”³ These concerns, while specifically echoing the production era American consciousness, play out in the space of the Pacific Northwest in 1901 not as a focal point for the narrative, but in the small moments that make up the film: Mrs. Miller smoking opium and reading a book, McCabe fumbling with his hat, the holes in Cowboy’s socks, the lawyer who dreams of being senator telling McCabe, “until people stop dyin’ for freedom, they ain’t going to be free.” The western genre here is not a vehicle for classical myth making, but rather to explore a new western history embedded with the contemporaneous movements, such as civil rights and feminism.

Considering “McCabe & Mrs. Miller” amongst both other westerns and the films of Robert Altman illuminates its significance both in terms of genre revision and also as part of a group of films that helped define American art cinema in the 1960s. Altman and his contemporaries such as John Cassavetes and Stanley Kubrick, signaled a movement in American cinema that prioritized the director as auteur, drawing on audiences growing familiarity with European art cinema. The aesthetics of the film were unique as well, as cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond developed the use of “flashing” responsible for the unique color saturation that gives the film an almost nostalgic golden hue in many scenes. The traits associated with other Altman films are also present: the overlapping sounds that often render dialogue incoherent, the constant camera movement, and a reflexivity that resists dominant Hollywood practices.

The sober ending, with McCabe breathing his last in the snow after a failed gunfight and Mrs. Miller falling into an opium haze, reflects Altman’s oft-repeated remark that “Death is the only end I know.” With the western genre repeatedly declared “dead” after the 1950’s, in “McCabe & Mrs. Miller,” Altman offers both a critical eulogy to classical myths and a re-thinking of the genre in terms of contemporary social issues.

¹ Ray Loynd, Los Angeles Times, March 1971. Janet Walker, “Introduction: Westerns Through History,” in “Westerns: Films Through History,” ed. Walker (New York: Routledge, 2001).

² Richard Slotkin, “Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America” (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

³ Robert T. Self, “Robert Altman’s McCabe & Mrs. Miller: Reframing the American West” (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 13.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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