

English Text below

Short Cuts (America oggi, 1993); regia: Robert Altman; production designer: Stephen Altman/art director: Jerry Fleming/set decorator: Susan J. Emshwiller; sceneggiatura: Robert Altman, Frank Barhydt; fotografia: Walt Lloyd; montaggio: Suzy Elmiger e Geraldine Perroni

50. Mostra internazionale d'arte cinematografica di Venezia: Leone d'oro al miglior film

Il cinema degli ultimi anni ha trasformato Los Angeles nel luogo del “sublime postmoderno” per antonomasia. Non pochi registi hanno utilizzato la megalopoli californiana come osservatorio privilegiato sul presente e laboratorio dove sperimentare stili e forme del contemporaneo urbano. In cinque film - *The Long Goodbye* (*Il lungo addio*, 1973), *Nashville* (id., 1975), *The Player* (*I protagonisti*, 1992) e *Short Cuts* (*America oggi* 1993) - Robert Altman ha proposto di considerare Los Angeles addirittura come metafora dell’America tutta. Descrivendo la città come un mondo confuso, frammentato, violento, in crisi di idee e di progetto - un intreccio senza sosta di personaggi, apparenze, status symbol, con i soldi come unico metro di misura.

Short Cuts è, già dal titolo, cinema del frammento e della continua sovrapposizione narrativa, senza protagonisti ma con un coro di personaggi “deboli”, fagocitati dal moto perpetuo senza meta - un errare convulso nelle freeway losangelinae. per scoprire di essere rimasti al punto di partenza. Nel film di Altman, Los Angeles è una conurbazione tutta periferia e niente centro, divenuta ormai “pluricittà”, città deflagrata che rispecchia l’identità fratta degli individui che in essa abitano. Altman costruisce uno spazio urbano specchio di una condizione morale, riflesso di un’umanità che, contrapponendosi con violenza alla natura, si è condannata alla dannazione. Negli interni domestici e lavorativi ogni dettaglio esprime la nevrosi e l’assenza di comunicazione. Altman si riserva un punto di vista esterno da cui guardare i personaggi: l’occhio della macchina da presa rimane dalla parte dell’ambiente, invece che stare in mezzo ai personaggi. Aeree sono, infatti, spesso, le visioni di Los Angeles nel cinema hollywoodiano e *Short Cuts* inizia proprio con una squadra aerea che rilascia sulla metropoli l’insetticida che dovrebbe debellare i parassiti che minacciano la vegetazione cittadina. Gli aerei passano sulla testa dei protagonisti di un film progettato per raggiungere la corallità massima, per “disinfettare” i personaggi ma anche cercando di abbracciarli, almeno per una volta, all’interno di un unico ambiente, percorribile bene solo in aereo o elicottero.

While ensemble films have been a staple genre of Hollywood and art film since the early decades of cinema, the increasing popularity of the form since the 1990s has prompted a number of innovative interpretations. In terms of their key features, ensemble films are multi-plotted, focus on multiple rather than one main character, and the stories and experiences of disparate characters are interwoven via connecting devices, usually with a view to creating an overarching sense of unity or synthesis. The major connecting device may be a location, a theme, an event, or some other connecting principle (for example, in Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* television programmes connect different sub-plots and diegetic spaces).

Varying in scope from an ensemble of characters who may meet or “mismet” in the same city or suburb (as in Robert Altman's *Short Cuts*), to characters living in disparate parts of the world who are – sometimes unbeknown to them – connected by an event or the effects of each other's actions (as in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel*), ensemble films reveal connections between a number of characters and plots that initially seem unrelated. Due to their attempt to connect and offer pattern to the complex landscapes of postmodernity – be they spatial, social or political – ensemble films can also be understood to serve a conceptual and cathartic function in that they can perform for the viewer through narrative and aesthetic means forms of “cognitive mapping” that the individual may not be able to realise in actual life.

Altman's use of the ensemble form serves as a case in point. Frequently cited by critics as a pioneer of the contemporary ensemble film, *Nashville* and *Short Cuts* are also viewed as representative examples of the network, fractal and hyperlink film. *Short Cuts* presents one of the most sophisticated instances of ensemble style and technique. More than most ensemble films, it exploits the interconnective possibilities of narrative, editing and mise-en-scène to create an extremely dense web of visual, auditory and thematic parallels and interconnections. Rapid crossing-cutting, visual motifs (such as water and smoke), graphic matches and music (the songs of the jazz singer, Tess) in conjunction with intersecting storylines that bring together an ensemble cast of twenty-two principal characters, all drive home the idea of interconnection in the complex modern world – even if some of those interconnections are coincidental and ephemeral (as when two sets of characters cross paths and accidentally receive each other's photographs at a photographic booth). For all its formal emphasis on interconnection and its political and moral provocations, *Short Cuts* somewhat refuses to work through the social and moral issues it presents and portrays a social landscape of moral apathy and disconnection. The social world that Altman presents us with is atomistic and morally bankrupt. During the film's opening montage, the viewer struggles to hear what characters are saying due to diegetic and non-diegetic sound, a situation that mirrors characters' failure to listen to or understand each other throughout the film. *Short Cuts* presents a social dystopia of tragic accidents, failed or unsatisfying heterosexual relationships, self-interest, and pervasive sexual violence against women (both imagined and realized). Not only are casual or chance encounters fleeting and often negative, most relationships in the film are fragile and fraught with miscommunication, jealousy, deceit or a resignation to the status quo.

In the short stories upon which the film *Short Cuts* is based, Raymond Carver explores the complexities of human behaviour and motivation and presents many of his characters sympathetically in spite of their flaws and failings. By contrast, Altman's film adopts a detached, ironic stance. We are not invited to sympathise with many, if any, of the characters and are positioned to be as indifferent and morally disconnected as they are – a viewing structure replicated in *Nashville* and *Pret-a-Porter*. *Short Cuts* foregrounds social disconnection and moral

anomie, its characters are, like the structure of the film itself, episodic, unable to learn from their experiences, and therefore doomed to repetition. The film shows that only a common denouement (the earthquake, which Altman deploys to narratively 'unite' the characters and storylines at the end of the film) can foster ethical relations between characters. These relations are invariably dropped by the director for most of the film, as if such relationships cannot be sustained in his vision of contemporary suburban Los Ang