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Advanced Seminar: Robert Altman

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Individuality in the Society of *Nashville*

Robert Altman's work *Nashville* (1975) is known for a democratic narrative conception with its 24 to 25 developed characters, an expressive divergence from the more common Hollywood way of exploiting stardom by emphasizing the narrative of only one to two characters. With its many developed characters, *Nashville* offers audiences the chance to consider different options and positions that one can place himself or herself in the society. The film places its narrative attention on a collective of people who live in Nashville, yet the film isolates each character in the commune-like environment, refusing to associate one character strongly to another by highlighting the circumstance of each individual and offering multiple options of inter-personal associations for each character.

The film takes place with the backdrop of a political election, a circumstance that can be easily associated with the collective effort of political groups and the clashes between each group. However, the presence of musicians in *Nashville* and the film's attempt to associate politics with musical stardom dismissed this presumption. In the section of the Elsaesser reading titled *Nashville as Stage*, the author notes that each singer takes the stage as the musician and by doing so assumes positions of political influence not because of their political inclination, but because of their private motivations. Elsaesser explains that:

“If Haven Hamilton is intimated a state governorship and Barbara Jean attends because her husband feels the need to restore a tarnished image with her fans, Sueleen Gay and Albuquerque have long been waiting for a chance to perform, while Tom, Bill, and Mary are persuaded to stay not least by their internal jealousies and rivalries as a trio.”(36)

The fact that the singers intend to define themselves in front of the public by their personal merits draws attention to how the fields of politics and entertainment are parallels to each other and intersecting in the way that they appeal to the public in the film. The singers are not involved with the election politics because they want to side with particular beliefs, but because they want to establish or maintain their own political fame as entertainers, and they are sharing the same channel of the audience viewership and the media as the politicians. The film suggests that politicians are the same way as the singers in how they seem to care more about their personal fame than their beliefs. The election scene at the very end questions the existence of Haven Hamilton's philosophies. After Barbara Jean was shot, Hamilton insists that the audience keep singing, a strategy that is more musician-like than it is politician-like. While the audience is expecting a word from him about the shooting event, his argument comes across as dismissive and demonstrative of a lack of philosophical backbone: "This isn't Dallas this is Nashville. You show them what we're made of. They can't do this to us here in Nashville." In the end, both singers and politicians put on performances to establish their individual images in the eyes of the public.

The dismissiveness of musicians and politicians of personal beliefs as well as Nashville's overall lack of political philosophies continues in Albuquerque's singing of the song "It Don't Worry Me" all the way to the end of the film and into the credit sequence. The lyrics of the song mention political issues such as the rise of bread price and the hopeless waiting of tax relief, but go on to dismiss these issues by turning towards the experience of the individuals. Towards the end of the song, she comments on the despairing vision of "ain't gonna be nothin' left in our graves except fly swatters with red dots on'em" as something that people do not need to worry about. The song highlights the issue that the community refuses to fight for collective

philosophies to combat the issues in their society because social obligations are overpowered by individualism.

As mentioned above, musicians and politicians take the performance stage in the community because of their private motivations. The idea is projected onto the mass public by the film's highlighting of the replaceability of the singers. The way that Barbara Jean is shot and Albuquerque gets the mic and rules the stage shows how easy it is to replace one singer with the other in their roles in the society. Both the event of assassination and the event of Albuquerque getting the mic take place quite randomly (what are the chances that the first person that Haven Hamilton hands the mic to is a singer skillful enough to calm the audience down?). They both happen as brief seconds in the film, and the film takes no time to reflect on the situations. The film just goes on, like how shows are supposed to. When Albuquerque picks up the mic, the film draws attention to Sueleen Gay's experience of frustration for not being the one getting the mic. The fact that there is another potential new star on the same stage that we know of in the film is a statement that anyone in the audience can easily emerge as a star, which suggests the similarity and interchangeability between the stars and the audience. In effect, the film suggests that the characters in the mass audience that the film did not take time to present the narratives of are probably equally individualistic and have star potentials as the characters that are famous in the film. They probably could, if chances allow, to be the ones managing their individual fame and flourish in their own narratives. All the way towards the end of the film, Sueleen Gay becomes a representation of the standby audience. She is the only person on stage that is not involved in the performance. Instead, she stands on the far end leaning against a column, having no movements, just watching the performance take place. She stands out on stage with her pink satin dress, presumably for the audience of the film to identify with.

The film features a communal, polygamic way of romance with the refusal of identifying characters together as couples, consequently highlighting the individual narratives. The film portrays sexual liberation which plays an important role in shaping American culture in the 20th century as means of personal sexual enjoyment and a means of achieving capital gains, two new alternatives of romance as motivation for sex in the modern culture. In fact, there is no real romance in the film, although it is being suggested in many cases.

The liaison between Barbara Jean and Haven Hamilton resembles public romance that is commonly used in the entertainment industry for the purpose of boosting fan base. At the beginning of the film, the politician and the singer walk together in a couple-like manner as they appear in front of the press. A layer of private connotation of this public romance is added when Barbara gets jealous in the hospital bed when she learns that Connie White is replacing her for one of Hamilton's public appearances, but the film makes no more advances on this matter. On a different occasion of suggested romance, Tom Frank calls another woman over just before Linnea Reese walks out of the hotel room after a night with him, but Linnea does nothing about it and instead treats it as normal, even though the film makes it pretty clear that Linnea has feelings for Tom. The two characters even have a discussion about how to say "I love you" in sign language in the previous scene. There is clearly a blurred line between sexual and romantic attraction between the characters, but the film dictates that it would only deal with the sexual in its refusal to address the romantic aspect. The notion of romance for Tom in its traditional sense is dismissed in a previous scene in the cafe where he sings a love song to a series of women that he slept with. Ironically, the film reduces true love and collectiveness of the commune-like society which it is supposed to be known for. Altman is known for breaking down the image of a present structure in his films, and this would be a typical example of that.

In a way, the film presents stardom as romance with the public, articulated especially through the solo acts of Tom Frank and Sueleen Gay which the film places side by side, but also suggested for other celebrity characters. Tom's singing of "I'm Easy" and Sueleen's singing of "Never Gets Enough" carry the same message that the performers are sexually charged as an appeal to the public, with Tom appealing to the women and Sueleen appealing to the men, both in club settings. The only narrative difference between the two acts is in the perception of the audience because of the different genders of the performers. While Tom has many women fans who want him for herself, Sueleen is treated as the object of the male gaze shared by all males in the room. It is interesting how in both scenes, the film focuses its shots on the female: Sueleen Gay or the multiple women watching Tom sing. In their case of Sueleen, there is the sense that she is being surrounded by the male collective, whereas Tom remains the protagonist of multiple romantic storylines with continuity of vision going on between him and multiple women at the same time. One could argue that Altman might be assuming the male gaze for the audience in having more screen time for women than for men, but this case also demonstrates how easy it is for the female to be reduced as an object, whereas the male remains as the center of the narrative. In turn, the comparison reflects that this is what happens when different genders appear as public figures.

The film examines multiple aspects of stardom in the late 20th century setting in the cultural background of individualism and sexual liberation. The film engages with the political events of election and assassination. While events like these physically unite the public, the film carries out the message, especially with the ending scene, that eventually no one really cares about politics at the point in history besides how it concerns their personal wellbeing. The film

takes on a synyster view of the community as a collective, as the collective is challenged by the individual's experiences.