

Breaking the Mould: The Spirit of Two Decades in Robert Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*

When we think of a Western movie, we usually do not think of one film in particular, but of a range of films with certain ingredients that we believe belong to the classic Western. The reason for this is that the Western can be considered a typical genre film; a film that embraces a particular cultural context. In the case of the Western this cultural context usually involves some kind of conflict between “civilized order and the lawless frontier” (Bordwell and Thompson 339). Indeed, according to John Cawelti, this thematic conflict is one of the fundamental elements of the Western genre: “A Western that does not take place in the West, near the frontier, at a point in history when social order and anarchy are in tension [...], is simply not a Western” (qtd. in Peek 211). However, the generic cultural context of the Western is more than the thematic conflict in an ‘Old West’ setting. As Thomas Schatz points out, in a genre film “the community,” “patterns of action,” and “character relationships” are standardized as well (568). In addition, Wendy Chapman Peek argues, the Western is usually about male accomplishments. The man most capable of triumphing over evil, will be considered the hero of the story. Women, she continues, most of the time are “dismissed, ridiculed, or reviled” in their typical gender roles of devoted or hapless eye-candy (209-10). These generic elements of the traditional Western are also apparent in the film *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*. After all, the story revolves around a conflict, set in the far-off frontier town of Presbyterian Church around the turn of the twentieth century. Moreover, the feel and spirit of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* – the use of natural lightning and the shades of brown and grey for the costumes and setting – are typical Western. But perhaps even more importantly, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* has its fair share of Western archetypes; there is the ‘lone ranger’ and catalyst, John McCabe; the strong-willed but loving whore, Mrs Miller; the seemingly passive but good-willed community; and the unstoppable and ruthless ‘bad guys’ in the shape of a corrupt mining company. However, though *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* carries generic

elements of the Western, I would like to argue that the film actually subverts the traditional generic Western by telling a story of the American Old West with the spirit of the early 1970s running through its veins.

To illustrate that *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* undermines most generic conventions of the Western, I will start off with the position of the male protagonist, John McCabe. As Peek points out, the Western is about male competence; a hero who (unintentionally) gets involved in a potentially lethal conflict, and eventually saves the day (209). In this respect McCabe is found wanting, not only as a hero, but also as a Western archetype. When we first meet McCabe → dressed in fine clothes, spending money – the town's men are impressed by the infamous gunfighter. McCabe is the man with the “big rep” and fairly quickly becomes the most respected person in Presbyterian Church. However, we soon learn that McCabe is actually a rather inexperienced, not too bright, but gentle, anti-hero. Firstly, McCabe is also known as ‘Pudgy’, which means ‘chubby’, which is not a very impressive name for a gun-slinging hero. Secondly, as soon as Mrs Miller arrives on the scene, McCabe's business-like exterior starts to show cracks. Though McCabe looks to impress Mrs Miller – buying rounds of drinks for the men in the saloon, and belittling her by calling her a ‘chippie’ in front of the other men – McCabe soon realizes that he is being outsmarted by her. When he then develops romantic feelings for Mrs Miller, the demise of the traditional dominant male hero is complete (Mask 55). McCabe's shifting position is beautifully illustrated by his soliloquy, in which he expresses his conflicted feelings for Mrs Miller, who he “ain't never gonna say nothing to” and is just “freezing [his] soul.” Lastly, McCabe seems to be completely undone by the other, power holding, characters in the story. He cannot seem to get a word in with Mrs Miller on more than one occasion; the shabby lawyer carries on about his own political motivations while McCabe just sits and listens; and the conversation between McCabe and Butler is an exercise in how *not* to negotiate a deal. “I know what I'm doing,” McCabe says to Mrs Miller, but the male protagonist of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* is basically overruled by a woman he cannot read, and the antagonists of the story. *McCabe*

↳ *Mrs. Miller* makes us believe we are dealing with a Western hero taking a stand, but then presents us with a man that cannot live up to the task.

The male protagonist in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* is not the only generic element that deviates from the traditional Western genre. So does the character of Constance Miller. Mrs Miller subverts, rather than sustains, the traditional role of the woman in Westerns. For sure, she represents the level-headed prostitute with a heart of gold that features in so many other Westerns, however, she is clearly more than that. Mrs Miller doesn't behave in what is considered a ladylike way, when she shoves down her food or smokes her cigarettes.

Furthermore, she turns out to be a rather clever business woman who is a pretty good judge of character; she overrules McCabe in the decision of a combined business venture; she is the first to address the importance of getting the most out of their business undertakings; and she makes sure she stays in charge of her own destiny: "Don't give me any of that 'little lady', I don't care about you [...], I want to make a deal with them." Another element is the fact that Mrs Miller is very much aware of the importance of women's independence. She realizes that the community she lives in treats women like tradable goods – the women in Presbyterian Church seem to be mail-order brides and prostitutes more often than not – but she takes this as a fact of life and tries to put it to her advantage, without romanticizing the situation. She explains to the widowed bride, Ida Coyle, that "prostitution is more honest than marriage" when she tells her the sex with her husband "weren't your duty. You did it to pay for your bed and board. You'll do this to pay for your bed and board too, only you get to keep a little extra for yourself and you don't have to ask nobody for nothing" (Mask 56). Finally, Constance Miller can be considered streetwise. She knows how their world works, whereas McCabe does not. It is Mrs Miller who sees the potential threat of McCabe's situation: "They get paid for killing, nothing else." She truly seems to care for McCabe when she tells him that he just has to sell out, but Mrs Miller knows what will happen to those who do not take care of their own, and she refuses to become a victim of the situation.

Mrs Miller's manner might be a front, but the female protagonist in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* is not

waiting for the hero of the story to come and take her away. On the contrary, she tries to make the best of a situation and attempts to convince her male counterpart to do the same.

Where both the male and female character in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* go against the generic conventions of the Western, so does the ambiguous nature of the conflict and the rather unusual ending of the film. The success of the business activities in the town of Presbyterian Church attracts the attention of a big mining company that wants to buy the pair out. The nature of the conflict therefore is an economic one, instead of the more traditional, idealistic, and power driven conflicts of so many other Westerns. Moreover, this conflict doesn't lead to the classical gun-shootings in the town square. Instead, it is about uncomfortable business negotiations that leave our protagonist with nothing more than the fear for his life – as Butler puts it: “I don't make deals [...] I came up here to hunt bear.” What is even more remarkable, is that, unlike in the traditional Western, the other men in town don't seem to care too much about justice being served. The townsfolk do not seem to recognize a common threat in Butler and are as easily impressed by him as they once were with McCabe. Finally, when the time of the showdown arrives, the town's people are not there to support McCabe. Nor are they locked in their houses, hiding for a gunfight. On the contrary, while McCabe is running from shelter to shelter, the entire community seems to be rushing through the town's streets, caring more about its burning church. Clearly this is not a traditional ‘Old West’ showdown, and the community of Presbyterian Church is not a traditional ‘Old West’ community. The only ties and conflicts in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* that seem to be of any importance are of a monetary nature. McCabe's choice to take his chances with Butler qualify him as a classic Western hero, but he unheroically dies alone; not only abandoned by the town's people, but also by the woman he loves. Mrs Miller, as Leonard Cohen's voice echoes, “chose [her] journey long before [she] came upon this highway,” and McCabe is “just a station on [her] way.” She has made her choice and prefers the ignorant bliss of the opium haze over the realities of companionship. The ending of *McCabe &*

Mrs. Miller is not a depiction of the good overcoming the bad, but an illustration of the growing individualism and loneliness in a changing society.

Why then did Robert Altman choose such a shift from the traditional conventions of the Western genre? According to some scholars, this break from traditional generic elements in film is caused by the “developing cultural standards in society” (Braudy and Cohen 530). These scholars claim that throughout time, generic elements in film synchronize with public opinion – “social processes” and “pervasive doubts or anxieties” are mirrored in contemporary stories and their themes (Bordwell and Thompson 338). As far as Robert Altman’s *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* is concerned we can distinguish at least two of those pivotal social processes. First of all, there were the clashing “social, cultural, and political conditions of the 1960s” that expressed discontent with American foreign policy, the display of America’s military might, and the ongoing war in Vietnam (Friedman 10). The Vietnam War in particular signified the loss of American “innocence” – it questioned triumphs in American history and stimulated directors to give a more critical, a more realistic, and a less romantic depiction of that history in American cinema. According to Barry Langford, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* is a perfect example of this (32). Indeed, it makes perfect sense to believe that by the end of the 1960s the genre of the Western no longer could carry the approval of an audience that was changing, questioning and even protesting “the very values the Western had traditionally promulgated” (27). Secondly, the sexual revolution was slowly becoming more visible in everyday life, and legal and moral restraints were gradually disappearing (White 24). Moreover, as Mask points out, these newly gained sexual freedoms coincided with the Hollywood Production Code adapting a new Rating Administration, which meant that films were no longer subjected to the restrictions of before (48). These cultural changes and changes in the film industry led to films that took sex, sexuality, or gender roles, even if not directly, as their subject themes – reflecting current views and ideologies. According to Mask, the position of the woman in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, and her “relationship to members of the opposite sex,” can in this respect be considered a landmark (50).

This shift towards less traditional gender roles and relationships during the late 1960s and early 1970s resonates not only in the film's title, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, but also in the characters of McCabe – a somewhat sensitive man trying to survive in a changing world – and Mrs Miller – a “relatively emancipated woman” getting “compensated for sexual labour” (56).

In the traditional generic Western, plot development is only secondary to setting, characters and conflict; “once we recognize the familiar cultural arena and the players, we can be fairly certain how the game will be played and how it will end” (Schatz 572). For *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* this is not the case. Rather than concentrating on the myths of the Old West, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* tells us a story that deviates from what is expected. It depicts a more contemporary and pragmatic reality – a reality concerned with progress, monetary relations and economic survival. Furthermore, though Robert Altman's protagonists are anything but faint-hearted, they are nothing like the heroes of the traditional Western. The anti-heroic position of McCabe plays an important role in the film. So does his death. McCabe dies, heroically, but utterly alone in the snow. The fate of the independent Mrs Miller is not any less heart-breaking. Unable to do anything about McCabe's pending doom, she turns her mind to the pretty colours of her opium-fumed world. These deviations from the traditional Western not only subvert the generic role of men, women and conflicts in Westerns, they also show, even if not explicitly, that the social and political issues of the 1970s often got translated “thematically, metaphorically, or allegorically” into films that “dared to shatter classical Hollywood conventions” (White 26, Bordwell and Thompson 491). One of its results is Robert Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, a film about a group of people building a community at a certain time in American history. A community concerned more with personal economic survival than answering questions about right and wrong, good and bad. A community where pragmatism prevails over idealism. Robert Altman shows us how this community gets on, how its people are interacting with one another, and what they are feeling. In other words he paints us a harsh, yet recognizable reality of a period in American history that is mostly known for its romanticized elements. By doing so Robert

Altman veers away from traditional generic conventions, but does this in such a way that even after all this time *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* still “stands out as a classic example of generic revisionism” (Mask 54) – making it one of the most interesting and moving films in ‘Western’ history to date.

Works Cited

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