

"I Need You to Fill It Out":  
Robert Altman's Raymond Carver

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### Abstract

In 1993, Robert Altman released *Short Cuts*, a three-hour film adaptation of 9 short stories and 1 poem from Raymond Carver. The film's experimental composition presents a challenge for analysis as a film adaptation. This essay shows that through lenses of intertextuality and paratextuality, in combination with concepts taken from auteur studies, and characteristics of ensemble and mosaic films, it becomes apparent that Altman's film can be read not only as a critical interpretation and synthesis of Carver's original texts, but also as an expansion of Altman's own creative history. Within this essay, analysis on Altman's auteur characteristics and how they were used to explore Carver's previously established themes will show that *Short Cuts* stands as more than a transfer of the stories from the page to the screen, casting away concepts of fidelity. In conclusion of an analysis of *Short Cuts*, the elements of the film not only help to expand Altman's specific vision of the human condition, but are also part of a critical interpretation that analyzes and allows the audience to see an opposite side of the commonly inferred claims in Carver's texts.

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**Table of Contents**

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments .....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
I. Introduction .....	1
II. Critical Reception of <i>Short Cuts</i> .....	4
III. To Approach <i>Short Cuts</i> .....	8
A. Intertextuality.....	9
B. Paratextuality .....	10
C. The Auteur Dimension.....	11
IV. Altman the Auteur .....	14
A. Altman’s Signature .....	14
B. Altman’s Carver.....	17
V. <i>Short Cuts</i> .....	25
A. Mosaic in Action: A Reintroduction to Carver’s Characters .....	26
B. Structuring Carver’s Themes in Altman’s World.....	32
C. Using Carver to Explore Altman: Women and Sexuality in <i>Short Cuts</i> .....	37
D. The Grand Finale .....	41
VI. Shining a New Light on Carver.....	43
Works Cited.....	45
Notes.....	48

“I Need You to Fill It Out”:  
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“[Altman] doesn’t like stories that pretend that the characters control their destinies, and their actions will produce a satisfactory outcome. He likes the messiness and coincidence of real life, where you can do your best, and some days it’s just not good enough. He doesn’t reproduce Raymond Carver’s stories so much as his attitude.”<sup>1</sup>

“What [Altman] tried to tell people again and again is you get from the feast what you bring to it. There isn’t a rightness and a wrongness to interpretation.”<sup>2</sup>

### I. Introduction

Just over 150-minutes into *Short Cuts*, Zoe Trainer parks her vehicle in a single car garage. She steps out of the vehicle, leaving the engine running, and from the back seat retrieves her cello case, takes a seat next to her car, begins to play as the garage fills with exhaust fumes, and her music slowly fades away as the scene dissolves to a new location. This moment is executed with simplicity: all but for the one intercut, the scene is captured in one fluid motion of the camera. The next time Altman shows this setting—several minutes later—Zoe’s isolated life that had been detailed through earlier parts of the film has come to an end, and her lifeless body lies sprawled across the floor and her mother weeps. This character and her final scene, both full of melancholy inhabiting a despairing world, is exactly what one would assume to witness in a film adaptation of American short story writer Raymond Carver. Ironically though, Zoe Trainer is not of Carver’s creation, but an original manifestation from the mind of director Robert Altman.

In 1993, Robert Altman released *Short Cuts*, his 29<sup>th</sup> feature film. The narrative of the film stood as an adaptation of nine short stories and one prose poem by Raymond Carver. Shifting the setting from Carver’s often explored Pacific North West to the in-

and-out of suburban Los Angeles, and in utilizing an ensemble cast to structure the film as a “mosaic,” interweaving the once separate stories, Robert Altman offers challenging film for interpretation, especially so when analyzing the film for its adaptation qualities. Because the film is hardly recognizable as a piece of Carveran fiction, it has received negative attention as a literature-to-film adaptation; if one examines thoroughly enough, it can be seen just how well *Short Cuts* compliments its source texts and author.

*Short Cuts*' composition presents a challenge for analysis as a film adaptation, but through lenses of intertextuality and paratextuality, in combination with concepts taken from auteur studies, and characteristics of ensemble and mosaic films, it becomes apparent that Robert Altman's film can be read not only as a critical interpretation and synthesis of Carver's original texts, but also as an expansion of Altman's own creative history. This essay will show the characteristics that made Carver the iconic short story writer he is considered, and of those that defined Altman's distinct directorial approach; in doing so, analysis of *Short Cuts* and its process is to determine what Altman found most intriguing in Carver's work and how he was able to take these elements and remake them in a new, innovative way that offers additional critical insight onto Carver's legacy and further stabilizes Altman's own artistic voice.

Linda Hutcheon, in the introductory chapter of her book *A Theory of Adaptation*, suggests that adaptations are a part of an ancient love for “sharing stories,” and that film adaptations has become so prominent in our culture because there is pleasure in “repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise. Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change” (4). However, filmmakers are not simply seeking the

pleasure of storytelling or pleasure from the comfort of repetition; film adaptations of literature present artistic challenges. Therefore, analyzing innovation is a valid approach when discussing a film adaptation. With that in mind, critical conversation of film adaptations offers more insight when looking beyond concepts dealing with fidelity. Hutcheon states: “adaptation is not slavish copying; it is a process of making the adapted material one’s own” (20). With adapting literature to the screen, there is an attempt to renew the source text (or texts) stylistically and present it to an audience in a more expansive medium with an alternative point of view. An adaptation therefore must show innovation or else face an ultimatum: What was the point?

With the film *Short Cuts*, Altman was able to reinvent Carver for the screen. Carver was an innovative writer whose work helped define the minimalist genre.<sup>3</sup> Altman too was an innovative filmmaker, for having a large section of his filmography that consists of highly original adaptations and for having mastered the ensemble-mosaic film structure—a film structure that is formed by the interweaving of multiple characters’ narratives into one cohesive story—which he established with such works as *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Nashville*, *The Player*, and *Short Cuts*. This ensemble-mosaic structure and the way Altman continually reshaped and pushed its limits is one aspect that makes him an innovative director. It is from this narrative approach—combined with Altman’s distinct stylistic voice—that he was able to reinvent Carver’s themes of loss and identity crisis and further dialogue on the topic of women, sexuality, and community that Carver initiated in the source texts. With *Short Cuts*, Altman pushes the definition of adaptation and creating a new window from which to view Raymond Carver.

## II. Critical Reception of *Short Cuts*

Too long have concepts of fidelity dominated conversation in adaptation studies, and critical reception of *Short Cuts* is no different. As a piece of cinema, *Short Cuts* has been well received, praised for its style, direction, and commentary on American life in the early 1990s; often, it is cited as one of best films of its era and of Altman's career. As one of cinema's premier reviewers for nearly 50 years, Roger Ebert gave *Short Cuts* a four-star review when it was released, writing, "Los Angeles always seems to be waiting for something. Permanence seems out of reach; some great apocalyptic event is on the horizon... 'Short Cuts' captures that uneasiness perfectly" (par. 1). Kenneth Turn, for a review in *Los Angeles Times*,<sup>4</sup> stated: "Perhaps the most remarkable thing about 'Short Cuts' is how effortless it all seems... If you want to know what the work of a mature American master is like, this is the place to look" (qtd. in Zuckoff 420-1). What is more, Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* claimed that *Short Cuts* is "triumphantly fierce, funny, moving and innovative," and at over three hours, the audience is left "wrung out emotionally but still hungry for more" (par. 1). However, when film and literary scholars who wish to analyze *Short Cuts* for the adaptation it is, the film is often panned with expectations of fidelity having shaped their critical approach. This approach remains the basis for most of its published critiques, wherein the majority of analyses claim Altman misinterpreted and failed to convey an appropriate rendition of Carver's vision of American people. But this film is not alone: adaptations inherently face criticism that addresses problems with fidelity, where reviewers and critics alike often claim, it is nothing like the book.<sup>5</sup> Fidelity and infidelity in adaptations have both been argued in



favor of and against the medium for as long as film and literature have had a relationship. This viewpoint for analysis leads to uninspired interpretations of film adaptations, as is the case for many of the publications on *Short Cuts*. There are undoubtedly changes from the text to the screen, but why?

Analyzing adaptations as a medium has very much become based in comparative studies. It is not misinformed to suggest that when one piece of art is the basis for a new expansive form the two should not be compared with one another—adaptations are dialogic and the source material cannot be forgotten. However, the adaptation (and its process) must also be seen as its own creative work; and it is too often that adaptations are not seen for their artistic choices but only their derailment from the source. Linda Hutcheon claims that adaptations are all “‘palimpsestuous’ works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts. If we know the prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experience directly” (6). Robert Stam best discusses the problems with fidelity in his essay “Beyond Fidelity.” Here, Stam too observes that “fidelity gain[ed] its persuasive force from our sense that some adaptations are indeed better than others and that some adaptations fail to ‘realize’ or substantiate that which we most appreciated in the source novels” (75). That is to say, it is often that adaptations are more widely accepted when they most resemble the source text(s); over time fidelity has become the common baseline of adaptation studies.

The approach to adaptations as not dialogic but comparative has led to many unsatisfying analyses of *Short Cuts*. One such analysis is Martin Scofield’s “Closer to Home: Carver versus Altman.”<sup>6</sup> Here, Scofield denies the use of fidelity as an evaluative force, stating his purpose in writing the article is “not to test fidelity...a film has its own

kind of vision, and a director should be free to mold his material in whatever way he thinks fit"; and yet, Scofield then goes on to examine *Short Cuts* with intentions "to ask what has Altman added and lost" from Carver's work (387). By focusing solely on what Altman has "added and lost" to and from the source texts, Scofield spends the remainder of his article forming a compare and contrast style analysis of the film and source texts.

Scofield concludes:

Carver's art is one of quiet simplicity, but under the plain surface and the calm flow of the prose there are current and eddies that pull at the feelings and thoughts like a river tugging at a fishing line. The flow of Altman's film is racy and exhilarating, and the experience of watching it is more like white water rating. There are logs of bumps and thrills and painful moments, but the river is shallower... (399)

Scofield suggests that, while it is obvious he enjoyed the film and found many pleasures in the direction, he believes that *Short Cuts* was unfaithful to the source on some tonal level and therefore failed for him as an adaptation. However, Scofield fails to hypothesize why these changes exist in the film and fails to examine their effect.

Analyzing *Short Cuts* based on concepts of fidelity is also found in Christopher D. Allsop's essay "Turn Off the Lights as You Leave: Altman and His *Short Cuts* with Carver." In his essay, Allsop first acknowledges, "the source material [in the process known as adaptation] is adapted to its new purpose with the implicit suggestion that it will be changed" (63). That is to say, Allsop too believes that infidelity is a given—changes are inherent. However, Allsop claims intentions to "compare and contrast" Altman's choices when handling Carver's original works. Allsop places focus on several

different components, one being “narrative” aspects (63). When dealing with the narrative and point of view of the stories and that of the film, Allsop believes that “by choosing to supplement backstory in place of Carver’s omissions, Altman cuts down on the complexity of Carver’s original narratives” (68-9). For instance, Allsop would suggest less can be inferred into the mysterious life of Carver’s “Mr. Slater” (“Collectors”) because Altman adapts the character (now named Stormy Weather) to a fuller life: his wife, kids, and profession are known. Allsop writes that “Altman strictly defines the terms of his character’s worlds, therefore cutting down on possibilities” (69), noting that an omission in literature allows the reader’s mind to fill the gap with a myriad of possibilities, but Altman has robbed his audience of this interpretive interaction and in the end “dilut[es] the narrative complexity” (69). On this subject, Allsop is missing the point of adaptation. Altman has every right to fill these gaps and present them as he wishes because that is part of interpretation. As the co-writer and director of this specific adaptation, Altman serves as a reader of the source texts and presents his interpretation (filled gaps); in doing so, he creates more gaps for his viewer’s own, new interpretations of the source texts. If Carver wished for reader interaction and interpretation, that is ultimately what unfolds with the presentation *Short Cuts*. The purpose of these texts as an adaptation is not to cut and paste Carver’s (assumed) intent, but to present Altman’s vision—his interpretation as a filmmaker reading Carver’s stories.

When discussing Altman’s alteration to the source texts’ geography, Allsop believes that shifting from the ambiguous locations Carver writes about (though they are often cited as the Pacific North West) to a distinct Los Angeles removes the possibility that Carver’s stories “could be happening next door”; as such, “there is a loss of

atmosphere and menace that envelops the original” texts (71). This change in location dislocates the source texts’ characters to the middle class, which is a fundamental aspect of Carver’s work. Scofield too writes that Altman’s film is attached to a more “sophisticated” world with this change in location; “[t]he quiet profundity of the mediation [found in Carver’s work] also gets lost in the distraction of modern life...none of the human predicaments in the film is given full respect and consideration” (392). While Allsop does claim that the motivation of shifting geography is supported—Altman wanted to have a more suburban setting to allow his characters to interact more fortuitously (“Collaborating” 9)—he notes that Carver always intended these stories to remain universal, and that “the shift in location...does not seem particularly significant” (71). Allsop ultimately aligns himself with the source texts and in doing so overlooks the film’s own creative endeavors. With this essay, Allsop becomes yet another critic who sets out to oppose fidelity as a means of analyzing film adaptations, but ultimately reaffirms the lens. What then should be the basis for analyzing *Short Cuts* as a literature to film adaptation? If there is no universal way of approaching adaptations, and the success of an adaptation is subjective to each viewer, then each film may be examined to see what kind of specialized attention is needed to garnish the most fruitful interpretation.

### III. To Approach *Short Cuts*

There are two elements beyond the limitations of fidelity to recognize when approaching *Short Cuts* for analysis: first, the film is an adaptation of Raymond Carver stories and exhibits intertextual conversations between Carver and Altman. Secondly, *Short Cuts* is an installment in the filmography of a seasoned filmmaker whose distinct

style and thematic exploration spans not just one film but the entirety of his filmography, specifically within his use of ensemble-mosaic films; therefore, recognition and analysis of the paratextual relationship between *Short Cuts* and Altman's earlier films will facilitate interpretation.

### A. Intertextuality

Intertextuality, a concept claiming that the basis for interpretation of one text is on the knowledge of a preceding text or texts, is important in analyzing adaptations because it reminds the researcher to keep the film's dialogic nature in mind. Robert Stam observes that "[a]ll texts are tissues of anonymous formulae, variations on those formula, conscious and unconscious quotations, and confluences and inversions of other texts" (81). Film adaptation critic Thomas Leitch agrees with this and elaborates on the idea of intertexts in "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory," writing that "it is equally true that [source texts] are intertexts, because every text is an intertext that depends for its interpretation on shared assumptions about language, culture, narrative, and other presentational conventions" (167). For example, a reader gains more insight into the *His Dark Materials* trilogy by British author Phillip Pullman when familiar with the texts' allusions (and often direct quotations) from John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*. Additionally, when a viewer is familiar with Robert Altman's film adaptation *Popeye* (1980), and knows the context of Olive Oyl's song "He Needs Me," more can be interpreted about the relationship between Barry Egan and Lena Leonard in Paul Thomas Anderson's romantic comedy *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), where the song underscores Barry's character-changing epiphany. As every adaptation is a conversation between artists and "less an attempted resuscitation of an originary word than a turn in an ongoing

dialogical process” (Stam 81), intertextuality moves the analysis of an adaptation past being seen simply as a transformation of art from one medium to another and to the understanding that the two pieces of are a part of an engagement, aiding one another.

### **B. Paratextuality**

G rard Genette furthers this field, which he calls transtextuality, and gives name to five differing categories: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality, and hypertextuality. Paratextuality, a factor of transtextuality, is also of importance when analyzing adaptations, specifically adaptations by filmmakers who are known for their distinct qualities. According to Genette, paratexts include elements such as “a subtitle, intertitles; prefaces, postfaces, notices, forwards, etc.” (*Palimpsests* 2), when dealing with literature. These secondary texts affect the way the reader interprets the main text.

Genette writes in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*:

A paratextual element, at least if it consists of a message that has taken on material form, necessarily has a location that can be situated in relation to the location of the text itself: around the text and either within the same volume or at a more respectful (or more prudent) distance. (Genette 4)

Genette keeps his analysis of paratexts to literature, but for film it can be noted that paratexts are relevant too and include subtitles, DVD cover art, intercutting titles, and prefaces such as “Based on the True Story,” “Based on the Novel,” or “Inspired by the Works of...” In today’s society of vast technologies, a film’s paratexts can go as far as—but not limited to—director and cast interviews, trailers and other promotional material, and DVD commentary. Creating an atmosphere around a source text makes paratexts a form of merchandise branding (Doherty par. 15). For example, the “chatfest” television

show *Talking Dead*. *TD* follows each episode of the drama series (a graphic novel adaptation) *The Walking Dead* to discuss recent episodes and hypothesize future plot developments (Doherty par. 3). Another modern addition to the concept of paratexts is interactive DVDs. In recent years, many DVD and Blu-ray films come with a special feature that allows its viewer to go “behind the scenes” at select moments through interactive pop-ups while the film plays.

And so it goes that every text has its paratexts that affect interpretation, whether directly or indirectly, through direct quoting or just allusions. Genette writes that the “text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions” (Genette, *Paratexts* 1). Paratexts can establish expectations within a viewer before s/he initially experiences the text, or paratexts can affect the view during subsequent encounters. Genette considers, of many, two types of paratexts: the original and the prior. The original is akin to the examples above and always stay close to the source texts. However, the prior paratexts predate the first publication of the text to which they relate. To approach a film as a work of an “auteur” is to recognize its relationship to the previous history of the filmmaker.

### C. The Auteur Dimension

The term “author” in regards to *Short Cuts* the film and its adaptation process raises a few complications. *Short Cuts* the story collection is compiled not from Raymond Carver’s hand, but by Robert Altman, who selected the nine stories and one poem he ultimately adapted. The published screenplay credits director Robert Altman, but also Frank Barhydt. Where their collaboration exists is unknown. Reviewing the published script reveals not a traditional screenplay, but instead a text that reads more as

a novelization—with exact dialogue, actions, cuts and sequences—of the finished film in screenplay format. With this, the role of “author” becomes blurred; when analyzing *Short Cuts*, all adaptation decisions are attributed to Robert Altman—the film’s director.

Auteur theory, generally speaking, places the director of film as not simply the leader in a collaborative effort, but just as in a literary context, as the author of the story—the singular voice of the work. The theory, though, contains as many complications in comprehension as adaptation studies because of its elusive finite definition. Moreover, because of these difficulties, auteur theory had its peak in critical conversation nearly a half century ago, and has since become a passé topic. Nevertheless, it still deserves attention. An auteur is often associated with a hyphenated artist: a writer-director, or perhaps a writer-director-producer. Alfred Hitchcock is an example auteur of this definition, being a producer-director who desired meticulous control over his productions. Hitchcock built a storyboard for every scene and shot of the film prior to principal photography. Hitchcock handcrafted every element in every moment in each of his films. Additionally, as a pseudo-signature—a stamp of approval, Hitchcock would make a cameo appearance in each of his films.<sup>7</sup>

An additional understanding of auteur theory comes from Peter Wollen, who claims that auteurism is not only a sense of cult of personality: “*auteur* theory does not limit itself to acclaiming the directors as the main author of a film” (186). Wollen claims that a true auteur’s film has meaning—“a core of meanings, of thematic motifs”—that arrives a posteriori while a typical director’s work is simply based on style and meaning arrives a priori (186). With this definition, an auteur’s films are not perceived simply as a product to be easily digested, but that experiencing the texts is the only way to gain



meaning and full appreciation of the filmmaker's intent. This insight into what an auteur may or may not be aligns well with the original concept of the auteur that comes from Francois Truffaut's essay "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema," wherein he categorizes filmmakers as scenarists (writers), metteur-en-scene (director, literal translation "scene setter"), and finally, auteurs, those who "invent the stories they direct" (232-3). With this definition, an auteur must have enough control to do more than simply place the story on film; an auteur must create the story he tells and craft the meaning the audience will receive.

When critics analyze *Short Cuts*, Robert Altman is defined as an auteur because his films have traits that make it easily distinguishable from his peers—not only in *Short Cuts*, but across his entire body of work. These traits, thematic and technical, all serve to aid in his storytelling, and this exists as a distinguishing point of view. These thematic and stylistic choices form a branding mark and add an inherent layer of paratext to each subsequent film the auteur produces, guaranteeing more meaning for the audience will be derived from each film when viewed as a part of the whole and not in isolation.

Therefore, when analyzing *Short Cuts*, there is more affecting the interpretation of Raymond Carver's work than is generally acknowledged. For study of this specific adaptation, one must not only look at the film's relationship to the source text, but also the filmmaker's previous films. *M\*A\*S\*H* and *Nashville*, two films that helped establish Altman as an auteur and served to equate Altman to specific technical choices of the ensemble-mosaic film structure, will aid in the analysis of *Short Cuts*.

#### IV. Altman the Auteur

*"[Altman is] like a genial, no-nonsense captain with a tender, flexible grip on things"*<sup>8</sup>

##### A. Altman's Signature

It is through Altman that one can approach Carver to find common characteristics between the two artists' works that will aid in the analysis of *Short Cuts*. Altman's filmography spans six decades, his narratives contained both strong female and male characters, and his films often focused on only a specific city or region. Carver wrote in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, where his work helped define the literary genre of minimalism; he conceived generally male characters, many of which had characteristics that mirrored elements of his own life; and his dark, despairing world is often associated with the American North West. As an outcome of understanding each author's work, one notices that Altman's stylistic approach is quite different than anything Carver published.

Altman's approach when directing, especially when handling an ensemble-mosaic film, was to dictate loosely. He desired only to conduct the collaborative effort of many. This loose approach was Altman's way to capture a grand sense of verisimilitude in his films, portraying true, honest human behavior; this has become one of his auteuristic characteristics. Giving his actors (all of whom he hand-selected for each film) range to create natural dialogue—the ability to alter their texts, actions, and delivery of lines<sup>9</sup>—helped Altman achieve this air of reality and actors were able to develop their own motivations while in rehearsals, collaborating with Altman for what ultimately appeared on screen. Altman's technical auteur stamp was a cacophony of sound and movement. The result is a body of film work that, as Helen Keyssar describes in "The Altman

Signature,” stands in “defiance of ordinary filmic syntax” (4). Altman explored many different film genres—western, war, melodrama, musical, romantic-comedy, comedy, and drama—experimenting with the expected conventions of each. Every film combines eclectic photography and sound, improvised acting, and, more often than not, ambiguity. These features all amount to one thing: an Altman specific vision of the world. This vision of the world was usually one of dark humor and of motion, and often presented to audiences with the narrative structure known as an ensemble-mosaic film.

Many of Altman’s films contain ensemble casts whose narratives interweave in and out of one another, creating not a blanket crocheted from the same spool, but a quilt stitched together from an assortment of previously chosen strands—otherwise known as a mosaic film. Peter F. Parshall discusses multi-plot films in *Altman and After*, writing that in the mosaic film, “More important than any individual’s story is the collective picture” (10). Much like an auteur’s body of work, a mosaic film gathers the most steam when viewed not for the individual integers but the sum of its parts. This subgenre is not to be confused with “network narratives,” where multiple stories unfold, but are parallels to one another rather than cohesive entities: for example, *Pulp Fiction* or *The Godfather II* (Parshall 11). Altman continued to utilize the ensemble-mosaic structure in a large number of his works that followed *Nashville*, especially in his later years.<sup>10</sup> This structure helped Altman portray a world that argues for the urgency of community.

Reviewing *M\*A\*S\*H* and *Nashville* to look at traits of structure, technical choices, and thematic exploration will help analyze Altman’s auteur characteristics. His Altman’s first acclaimed feature was the ensemble film *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), an adaptation of Richard Hooker’s novel of the same name. Well received by critics, reviewers, and

fans alike, the film went on to gain five Academy Award nominations, with Ring Lardner Jr. winning the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay.<sup>11</sup> Pauline Kael, in a review for *The New Yorker*,<sup>12</sup> wrote, “*M\*A\*S\*H* is a marvelously unstable comedy...a sick joke...full of pleasure of the unexpected...I think [the film] is the best American war comedy since *sound came in*, and the sanest American movie in recent years” (qtd. in Zuckoff 290). Most importantly, the film introduced to the world the powerful vision of Robert Altman. A satire on the war genre, Altman’s film stands more as a commentary of human interaction than of politics. One of the elements that made the film stand out and gained Altman much of his attention was its experimental structure. Through its use of an episodic narrative, Altman is able to move around loosely and capture a realistic depiction of these men and women in war as they live day to day and deal with a variety of problems.

The story’s loose narrative mimics that of the source novel, but when Altman brought it to film it became a declaration of the power of film. Mitchell Zuckoff writes in the introduction to Altman’s Biography:

[Altman] disliked the word “story,” believing that a plot should be secondary to an exploration of pure (or, even better, impure) human behavior...He loved the chaotic nature of real life, with conflicting perspective, surprising twist, unexplained actions, and ambiguous endings. He especially loved many voices, sometimes arguing, sometimes agreeing, ideally overlapping. (14-15).

In *M\*A\*S\*H*, audiences were introduced to not only what became Altman’s signature narrative structure, but also his eclectic use of sound. As an auteur characteristic, this

soundscape became a defining element of an Altman film and helped the director emulate the way a person hears the natural world: characters talk over each other, multiple conversations happen at once, and there is always background noise to interweave with that of the foreground. This busy camera and sound work add up to Altman's vision of the world as one with great verisimilitude, creating an experience for his audience rather than that found in a typical film viewing.

Five years after *M\*A\*S\*H*, Altman released *Nashville*, which further established Altman's use of the ensemble-mosaic film structure and themes.<sup>13</sup> Altman acknowledges that while *M\*A\*S\*H* made him known, "I was perceived differently after *Nashville*. It just verified in the critics' minds that I had some sort of value, and that *MASH* wasn't just an aberration" (Zuckoff 519). From Pauline Kael's review in *The New Yorker*:<sup>14</sup> "*Nashville* is a radical, revolutionary leap... a documentary essay on Nashville and American life; [and] a mediation on the love affair between performers and audiences" (qtd. in Zuckoff 488). With *M\*A\*S\*H*, Altman explored relationships among a tight knit community, but with *Nashville*, Altman was able to further expound upon this theme using an entire city. Structuring the film as a mosaic, strung together by a cast of 24 interweaving characters, Altman abandoned typical filmic syntax to portray the connectedness of life in Nashville over the course of five days.

### B. Altman's Carver

"I read all of Ray's writings, filtering him through my own process."<sup>15</sup>

In the short story collection *Short Cuts*—a collection built not by Carver but by Altman for simultaneous release with his film—each narrative remains independent of one another, but all ten share commonality in themes and motifs of sex and infidelity,

love and unhappy marriages, alcoholism and drug use, identity crisis and voyeurism, isolation, emotional ruptures, and patterns of cause and effect. Carver himself would claim that he did not have themes but obsessions, stating in an interview with Francesco Durante that “the relationship between men and women, why we oftentimes lose the things we put those value on, the mismanagement of our own inner resources” were his obsessions; “I’m also interested in survival, what people can do to raise themselves up when they’ve been laid low” (199). These obsessions helped Carver create a world not too unlike his own. Carver was a writer who created a fictional world under an umbrella of his own experience. Therefore, for this analysis of the adaptation, it becomes informative to examine Carver. It becomes even more rewarding in regards to analysis of *Short Cuts* when this examination of Carver is done through the eyes of Robert Altman: what did Altman know of Carver and how did this knowledge affect the outcome of the adaptation? Moreover, Altman held a very close relationship with Raymond Carver’s widow, Tess Gallagher, throughout the production of the film, and at many times she spoke for the late writer with concern for the source texts.

In many instances, Carver wrote from his own experience. Raymond Cleve Carver was born into a working class family, where life was anything but drenched in luxury: “The first house I clearly remember living in,” Carver recollects in the essay “My Father’s Life,” “had an outdoor toilet” (par. 10); weekends were spent fishing and hunting, leading Carver to a love of the outdoors; and C.R. [Carver’s father] was a drinker, causing many disturbances in his relationship with Ella [Carver’s mother]. Carver writes that his father claimed to seek out better jobs for the family’s sake, but actually believes his father was always trying to do better for only himself, taking new

jobs because, as Carver writes, “my dad had grown restless and simply wanted to try his luck elsewhere. Things had gotten a little too predictable” (*Father*, par. 18). Carver spent his time at home unhappy and uncomfortable, an eager teenager ready to leave the house, always longing for something better. This sense of longing passed down to Carver’s characters, standing out as one of the apparent themes within his body of work.

Seemingly an important aspect of Carver’s world, this sense of longing was kept intact and explored further within Altman’s film adaptation through characters who, often from a point identity crisis, attempt to better their lives.

For the duration of Carver’s first marriage,<sup>16</sup> he struggled to keep his growing family financially secure, and took on various part-time jobs, “pumping gas, sweeping hospital corridors and fast-food restaurants, managing an apartment complex, and even picking tulips” (Meyer 4). Carver would spend the next section of his life married and having children, moving from city to city around the west coast and mid-west, jumping from school to school—first studying, later teaching—and writing, Carver was always writing. For a long time, success seemed to be elusive. The years of career uncertainty and financial struggle led Carver and Maryann to a rocky, unstable marriage, and as his father before him, Carver developed a dependency for alcohol that would land him in the hospital on more than one occasion before regaining sobriety in the late 1970s. This desire to find one’s self is apparent throughout Carver’s body of work. Like the sense of longing, this form of identity crisis stands out as a prominent theme within Carver’s stories and also within Altman’s film *Short Cuts*.

After his 1981 release of *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, Carver had moved into a relationship with fellow writer Tess Gallagher, and, as Adam Meyer asserts,

[h]is life had moved in a positive direction--he felt more hopeful and more optimistic since he was no longer drinking and had become involved with Tess Gallagher--and such a change was naturally reflected in his fiction, which became open, expansive, and generous, rather than rigorously pared down. (15)

With his characters, Carver explored happier endings in a gloomy world—a point that Altman further explores in *Short Cuts*. But it was Carver's work produced during his times of struggle that would go on to define his association with the “minimalist” movement. Carver biographer Carol Skelenicka describes Carver's common topics as “money problems, alcoholism, embittered marriages, and disaffected children; about muted, interior crises about on by bad luck or neglect rather than intent. Carver knew that territory because he lived in it for much of his life” (ix).

In the introduction of his collection of Carver stories, Altman observes that “Carver made poetry out of the prosaic...he [captured] the wonderful idiosyncrasies of human behavior, the idiosyncrasies that exist amid the randomness of life's experiences” (“Collaborating” 7). Carver wrote in the essay “On Writing” that “[e]very great or even every very good writer makes the world according to his own specifications” (13). Over the years, repeatedly covering his obsessions formed a body of work that those invested in Carver's work refer to as Carver Country, which by Carver's specifications is a dark, destabilized world populated by the despairing working class. Tess Gallagher, in the



foreword to the published *Short Cuts* screenplay, notes that the term Carver Country is, “in fact, an amalgam of feelings and psychic realities which had existed in America...before Ray began to write about them. But because of his writing we began to give these feelings and patterns more credibility” (8). Adam Meyer adds to this discussion of Carver Country by asserting that “Carver Country is anywhere certain kinds of people congregate, whether East or West, North or South” (20). Rather than ascribing to any one such geographic location, Tess Gallagher observes that Carver’s work was an exploration of the “American grotesque” (Zuckoff 433); not with the same weight that the word generally connotes, Carver’s grotesque America is one full of characters who are at times lost and misunderstood, but not entirely without compassion.<sup>17</sup>

What Altman would have discovered when examining Carver’s work is that all of his obsessions unfold through characters’ relationships with one another, usually unhappy ones. Adam Meyer writes:

What drives [Carver’s characters] is a search for something better, the hope that their lives will be different in a different environment. All too often, though, in this as in their other dreams and aspirations, their troubles follow them [...]

The characters’ marriages and relationships are often a shambles, and too frequently those characters turn to alcohol as a temporary sop. Alcoholism only exacerbates the situation. Feelings of emptiness are prevalent, and violence never seems to be too far from the surface; its occasional eruption is almost expected. (20-1)

Carver's characters are the driving force in his stories. Altman claims that "all of Carver's work [is] just one story, for his stories are all occurrences, all about things that just happen to people and cause their lives to take a turn" ("Collaborating" 7). Therefore, placing all of the characters in the same world allows each character relationship to be juxtaposed against another's and thus strengthening each obsession's examination. The stories that make up *Short Cuts* are dark. Tess Gallagher states, "There were a lot of complaints about [Altman] having chosen the darker stories. The reason he hadn't chosen others was they weren't available. ...It turned out that a filmmaker...had optioned a good number of stories. [Altman] had to choose from what was left" (Zuckoff 421-2). But even through having only a limited supply, each of these stories proves that a large aspect of Carver shows the preference of the human condition and the mind over other story elements such as landscape and action. Taking these stories as a whole, rather than individually, provides one synthesized view of life.

Among the characters across all the stories, two of the largest themes explored are identity crises, which lead characters to long for something more to life and thus take actions to satisfy themselves; and cause and effect (decisions and their consequence), where Carver explores the decision humans make and the actions humans take, and the repercussion that come with them. These two themes are most prevalent in the stories "So Much Water So Close to Home," "A Small Good Thing," and "Jerry and Molly and Sam," and the poem "Lemonade." It is from these four narratives that Robert Altman designed the core of *Short Cuts*.<sup>18</sup> But not to neglect the rest of the collection, *Short Cuts* also contains other thematically relevant stories. In "Neighbors," when asked to watch after their neighbor's apartment, Bill and Arlene Miller are led to reevaluate the current

unpleasant routine of their own lives. For Bill and Arlene, the apartment becomes a setting to reimagine themselves a happier couple. "They Are Not Your Husband" follows Earl Piggot, an out of work salesman who forces his wife Darlene to go on a diet because he is unsatisfied by how sexual others perceive her to be. "Vitamins" follows a narrator who attempts to cheat on his wife Patti, a vitamin saleswoman, with her friend, Donna. "Will You Please Be Quiet Please?" is about Ralph and Marian Wyman, a husband and wife who argue over an affair that the wife had several years prior, which leads Ralph to a drunken binge, wandering the streets of his city contemplating his actions. "Collectors," one of Carver's more obscure stories, has a narrator visited by a vacuum salesman, Aubrey Bell, and the two men discuss the accumulation of unwanted pieces of one's self. "Tell The Woman We're Going" is about two lifelong best friends who, in their twenties, feel that they have settled down too soon and go out seeking a good time.

In "So Much Water So Close To Home," the reader is aligned with Claire Kane, one of Carver's strongest female characters, dealing with the news that her husband Stuart and his fishing buddies found the body of a dead, young girl in the river they frequent and that they neglected to report the incident for several days. The story details the falling out of one happy couple as they grapple with their differing viewpoints of the world. "So Much..." shows Carver exploring a common theme of his work: that the decisions we make affect not only us but also those closest to us. Altman later furthers this, that our decisions affect every person. Stuart feels that there is nothing wrong with his actions and response to the dead girl, while Claire feels that his actions were no light matter and becomes greatly compelled to reexamine their relationship.

In "Jerry and Molly and Sam," Al is a man in his middle age going through an identity crisis. His unhappy life is the accumulation of an unsatisfying marriage, children, and a dog he does not want. Jerry is not content with work, and is also having an affair; he cannot recall how things have gotten so bad in life, so he just roams the streets of his town at night alone, dreading the real world. His conclusion is that he must get rid of his dog. When he does, he only sees this decision as making life even worse: "He saw his whole life a ruin from here on in. If he lived another fifty years...he felt he'd never get over it, abandoning the dog" (134). When he attempts to get her back, she refuses and he is left standing alone in the street.

In "A Small Good Thing," Howard and Anne Weiss's son Scotty is on the verge of falling into a coma in the hospital after a hit and run accident; he ultimately dies. This story appears most intact when adapted to the screen by Altman and details its characters' time of suffering and loss. Anne and Howard are contently married. Howard is described as being "happy...he had kept away from any real harm, from those forces he knew existed and that could cripple or bring down a man if the luck went bad, if things suddenly turned" (Carver, *Short Cuts* 96). Anne too is happy, a loving, caring woman. "So Much..." and "Jerry..." show lead characters in isolation, and this isolation and detachment from those in the rest of their world push them towards miserable endings. While it would be morbid to claim "A Small..." ends well, the characters are able to find a beginning of peace with the interaction with the once haunting baker, who now offers them food after they have not eaten in hours, stating, "Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this" (*Short Cuts*, Carver 12). This scene evokes a sense of community.

The final Carver text to be used here is “Lemonade.” This prose poem retells the cause and effect system that led to Jim Sears’s son dying, having drowned in a river. Altman took this poem for its theme, cause and effect—the decisions we make determine our fate—and used it as the thesis of his film, claiming that “[‘Lemonade’] is really a perfect example of what all of the film is about, about what all the stories are about. They are all about the little crossroads we constantly meet in our lives and are constantly going this way, then this way...and to try to figure out which one of those branches...got us to where the dilemma is” (qtd. in Kaplan and Dorr). By placing the characters all in the same world, almost combining the works to form a novelist’s view of Carver’s world, Altman keeps “Lemonade” at the heart, showing how all the characters affect one another.

#### V. *Short Cuts*

Every film is received and interpreted differently. For Altman, *Short Cuts* was received well and revitalized his plateaued career. Additionally, the film brought about renewed critical attention for Altman. Bernard Weinraub, for *The New Yorker*,<sup>19</sup> wrote that, “At 68, an age when most of Hollywood’s film makers are retired, ignored or treated like dinosaurs by movie executives and talent agents, Robert Altman has embarked on the most radical and adventurous journey of his career” (Zuckoff 419). After nearly a decade as a marginalized director, Hollywood embraced Altman’s satirical look on life once again in the early 90s after he released two critically praised films, *The Player* (1992) and *Short Cuts* (1993).

When analyzing *Short Cuts* as an adaptation, an approach to examine how Altman has interpreted Carver's texts and to what effect that has on the audience and Altman's own voice offers very satisfying critical insight. In Altman's interpretation of the text, to what degree has Altman shifted ideologies and for what reasons? What intertextual conversation(s) with Carver's stories is Altman attempting to engage in, concerning the characters and themes in the source texts? What paratextual elements are brought to the film by Altman's status as an auteur filmmaker? In the end, we observe a set of stories and a film that both manage to look at American life with an identical concept: the seemingly insignificant aspects in ordinary peoples' lives add up to much more than immediately visible.

#### A. Mosaic in Action: A Reintroduction to Carver's Characters

What Altman does in *Short Cuts* with his distinct stylistic approach—immediately noticed in the opening and initial scenes of the film—is stamp his voice on this Carver adaptation and reestablish it as his own. The first noise heard in *Short Cuts* is the pitter-patter of helicopter blades in motion. Then, city lights at night. An off screen helicopter illuminates a sign that reads “Remember Medfly Quarantine No Homegrown Fruits Or Vegetables To leave Area” while an upbeat jazz tempo of walking bass and percussion underscores, and title credits in neon colors are superimposed against the dark skyline: “A Robert Altman Film.” The actors' names appear next, moving around in an amorphous pattern, superimposed over the formation of helicopters flying through the night sky spraying the insecticide Malathion. *Short Cuts*' opening is similar to that of Altman's previous film *M\*A\*S\*H*, wherein medical helicopters fly through Korean mountains, and the film's theme, “Suicide is Painless,”<sup>20</sup> underscores the title credits.

This allusion, in addition to the initial image of a vast city, informs the audience (specifically those familiar with the source texts who may be expecting to experience Carver) to prepare for much more Altman than Carver. Here, Altman claims possession of the characters and their tales. The first dialogue, spoken by a character the audience learns to be Howard Finnigan in a broadcast news editorial, says, "Time has come to go to war again. Not with Iraq, international terrorist, or what was once Yugoslavia, but with the Medfly: a potentially devastating insect that has chosen to make California its home" (Altman, *Short Cuts*). As the film begins, it is noticed that we are no longer in the calm, secluded Pacific North West of the source texts, but a bustling city with a soundscape not too distant from that of a war zone. The audience should expect Carver country no more, and with what could be interpreted as self-referential dialogue with the audience, Altman acknowledges in the introduction to the screenplay that that this shift to California could be "potentially devastating" (Altman, *Short Cuts*).

Throughout the remainder of the title credits and slightly beyond, the opening sequence continues and the audience is introduced to every major character in the narrative as their stories being to intersect and weave together. This type of opening and of introduction to the film's characters would be familiar to viewers in Altman's films, especially his ensemble films, as this sequence is close to that of *Nashville*, *The Player*, *Gosford Park*, and several others, where the audience is graced with the sight of most major characters up front. The sequence unfolds as such: Earl Piggot drives his limousine down an empty highway; Howard Finnigan and later his wife Anne Finnigan lie in bed watching Howard's editorial on the television screen; Zoe Trainer, with the help of a back orchestra, plays her cello to a full audience inside of a concert hall, as Marian

Wyman and her husband Dr. Ralph Wyman, along with Claire Kane and her husband Stuart Kane, sit in the audience and watch; Jerry Kaiser places a tarp over his work truck to protect it from the Malathion and then moves inside where his wife Lois Kaiser, a phone sex operator, fixes food for the couple's two children and speaks with a client; Earl arrives at an all-night diner where his wife Doreen Piggot works; at a jazz club, the music that has been underscoring instantly becomes intrinsic, as Tess Trainer sings "Prisoners of Love" to a live audience that includes Honey and Bill Bush, who discuss their plans to house sit for their neighbors;<sup>21</sup> the music stops but the helicopters and editorial continue as Sherrie Shepard and her husband Gene Shepard prepare for the Malathion spray, arguing over whether or not to bring the family's dog, Suzy, inside; Gene leaves and the music starts again; at the concert hall, Zoe continues playing and the Wymans and Kanes make plans for a get-together, as Ralph complains about the fact because "we don't even know them" (Altman, *Short Cuts*); Lois continues with her client, much to Jerry's disapproval; back at the club, Tess finishes her song and Bill and Honey Bush leave; Casey Finnigan, after a nightmare, joins his parents in bed, leaving Howard noticeably annoyed; as Howard's editorial finishes, the helicopters land and pilot Stormy Weathers calls his ex-wife Betty to wish her a happy birthday; Betty hangs up on Stormy and returns to bed.

This 15-minute sequence is crucial to the audience's understanding of the film's structure and pacing and is informative to those previously familiar with Carver's texts on how the individual narratives have been adapted for this production. Each scene in the sequence detailing characters at various moments does not cut on form or build any momentum; instead, the scenes intertwine rather chaotically, allowing the audience to



only see each character (or couple) briefly before cutting away to someone new. This pace and editing style is a signature trait of Altman's direction. A montage such as the one that opens *Short Cuts* shows in what is nearly real-time that these individual characters are separate from one another and at the same time cohabitate but one environment. This opening sequence too tells the audience how Altman has approached Carver's characters. By altering the setting—both in time period and geographic location—Altman has reinterpreted Carver's characters.<sup>22</sup> We are no longer in the secluded North West country of mid-century Oregon or Washington, but in 1990s Los Angeles, a busy city with hive-like interaction. This shift gives Altman the ability to reinvent the stories as he sees fit for his interpretation.

This opening addresses and establishes one of Altman's common tropes; throughout his filmography, Altman rarely moves outside of one specific setting, which allows every character to interact intimately with multiple other characters. *Nashville* begins with a self-referential marketing gimmick, billing each cast member followed by the narrator shouting "in Nashville," the city where the entirety of the film unfolds. In *The Player*, all the action happens in Hollywood and surrounding Los Angeles locations after a single shot opening sequence detailing the interworkings of a production studio. *Kansas City* takes place entirely in Kansas City. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* takes place entirely in a secluded North Western town. In choosing a large, static setting, Altman allows himself to play with the random and yet non-random nature of fate. In the introduction to the *Short Cuts* stories he collected, Altman writes "the reason we transposed the settings...to Southern California was that we wanted to place the action in a vast suburban setting so that it would be fortuitous for the characters to meet"

("Collaborating" 9). The audience knows from the cross cutting of the opening sequence that these characters' lives are going to weave together. If their setting were to be a small town in the North West, the likelihood of their knowing each other would be far greater. Therefore, Los Angeles allows Altman's thesis of cause and effect to unfold just the way he needs it to. In addition, to add to the sense of reality, it was wise for Altman to film in an area he knew and understood. To make the film set in the upper North West would have been too voyeuristic and Altman's voice would have felt too forceful. Altman also notes that there were logistical reasons for the shift in location—it is where he was established ("Collaborating" 9). This gives support to Altman's loose, spontaneous directorial command. The setting, much like Altman's approach with actors, has become an improvisation: shoot the film where you can.

While the opening sequence film stands as a reintroduction to those familiar with Carver's characters, these new roles fully become apparent as the narrative matures. This maturation shows that at the core of the film Altman pulls primarily from four of the ten original narratives, and he pieces these stories together using the characters from the additional six stories. These four narratives remain visible as the core of the film because they stand out as the least deconstructed of the ten chosen texts. The first scene that gives a sense of how the stories now interweave and connect as a new narrative finds pool cleaner Jerry Kaiser working at the Finnigan's house. Jerry Kaiser, Altman's interpretation of Jerry Roberts from Carver's "Tell The Woman We're Going" is a middle class worker tending to the needs of upper class Ann and Howard Finnigan, who hail from the source text "A Small Good Thing." In this scene, characters from two different Carverean narratives meet by necessity. The Finnigan's neighbor, Tess Trainer,

interrupts Ann and Jerry's interaction as she also pleads for his help with her own pool. The Trainers are Altman's creation and Tess's intrusion is a symbol for Altman's new control in Carver's world.

Capturing the scene is Altman's signature floating camera. Constantly shifting focus between characters, the camera rarely finds itself holding on a static composition. This technique gives a sense of reality, because when simultaneous action unfolds, the audience is attempting to capture it all and thus the camera acts as a surrogate eye, shifting between all possible focal points. This technique places the viewer in the space with the characters. Accompanying this moving camera is an audio track that is just as action packed. As each character talks, the others—as is often the case in real life—step on each other's words. When Howard comes into the backyard to get Ann's assistance with a tie, their conversation continues and overlaps with Jerry and Tess's conversation; this causes four voices layered at once. This type of audio approach is the case for many scenes in *Short Cuts*, and for nearly every Altman film—a distinct auteur feature of Altman.

The constant movement and chaotic soundtrack is a common Altman technique and adds to each narrative more (co)motion and quicker pacing than any typical Carver story offers, but for good cause. Altman's aesthetic interpretation brings about a deep sense of realism to the world of the film, which is a characteristic of *Short Cuts* that Carver, who appreciated the classification of "dirty realism," may have appreciated. Carver's original texts are quiet and more often than not unfold within the mind of the characters in each text. Carver's stories seem real to life because the reader understands the characters from the interior and can analyze the character's world alongside them.

*Short Cuts* could have achieved this if Altman were to have utilized a second-person point of view camera technique or if Altman were to have used a voiceover narration, placing each character's thoughts up front for the audience. Instead, what Altman manages to create, as he does in every film he directs, is a world in motion that simulates the real world the audience lives in. As a minimalist writer, Carver included only what the reader needed to understand the narrative, nothing more and nothing less. While Altman is not quite a minimalist, his films offer the same—nothing more and nothing less than what is needed to understand the action on the screen. Unlike what is found in many of the narratives in Hollywood's cinema, Altman's prominent moving camera mocks documentary style filmmaking, offering an intimate, focused look on life. As is the case for *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *Nashville*, *The Player*, and many others, *Short Cuts*' aesthetic choices take on a cinema vérité style presentation, using the camera's movement and eye guiding technique to place the viewer in the world alongside the characters.<sup>23</sup>

### **B. Structuring Carver's Themes in Altman's World**

Despite Altman's different stylistic approach to the material within the source texts, the themes Carver presented are still apparent for the viewer of *Short Cuts*. In addition to the previously mentioned reasons, the new setting of L.A. allows Altman to explore how the common motifs and themes of Carver's texts are not class specific and to investigate a higher class of people in addition to the working and middle classes that Carver portrays.<sup>24</sup> Combing the two artists' visions, these themes and motifs are seen present in the lives a humankind across the entire social hierarchy. With Altman's take on "A Small Good Thing," a major Carverean theme of loss is visible. A second core story,

“So Much Water So Close to Home,” details, like so many other pieces of Carver’s work, the falling out of a marriage. With the third most prominent story visible in the film, “Jerry and Molly and Sam,” Altman tackles Carver’s frequent subject of infidelity.

Altman blends these stories and ties them together with elements and characters from the other six that form vignette-like examples of a thesis pulled from the prose poem “Lemonade.” This thesis at the heart of Altman’s film states that as the characters move through their lives haphazardly bumping into one another, the moments in their world are constructed from a cause and effect pattern. This critique of moment-to-moment life is not only related to the texts at hand, but is an Altman film characteristic found in more than a dozen of his films. For example, within *Short Cuts*, the crisis at the Finnigan’s home is initiated when Doreen Piggot knocks over Casey Finnigan with her car, putting him in the hospital and ultimately leading to his death (though this final element remains unknown to Doreen). This first incident causes Doreen to ponder how anything could happen at any moment. Thankful that nothing too negative came out the situation, to her knowledge, she is pushed to reevaluate her life and those she is associated with, including her destructive, alcoholic partner and her distant daughter.

Added to the Finnigan’s plot is Howard’s estranged father who left many years prior after cheating on his wife, which led to a divorce. Paul and Howard now make up the father and son characters from Carver’s poem “Lemonade,” only in the film, the boy falling into the river did not die (though, with the death of Howard’s son, the death of a child is still present in close proximity). Adding Paul Finnigan’s character gives background as to why Howard may have disdain for someone who assumes a fatherly role, even if it is himself. Altman’s version of Howard Finnigan shows little interest in

Casey in early scenes in the film, giving sighs and appearing annoyed with his son in several scenes. Even after Casey is in the hospital, Howard seems far more calm and collected than Ann or other parental figures with children in the hospital the audience sees. While this character background for Howard has no visible roots in the source text, Altman uses Paul Finnigan's character very strategically. In a film that is 183-minutes long, Altman has his character deliver a monologue at the 95-minute mark. Anchored directly in the center of the film, the audience witnesses a six-minute speech from Paul Finnigan that discusses to some degree the details of the poem "Lemonade" and further argues the cause and effect pattern of life: the thesis of *Short Cuts*. From that moment on, Howard is changed, becoming more passionate and showing more attention to Ann as they endure their time of suffering and wait for Casey's recovery.

Still keeping up the exploration of cause and effect, Altman's adaptation of "Jerry and Molly and Sam" handles the popular Carverean theme of infidelity. Gene Shepard's adulterous nature causes disruption in not only his house, but also that of his mistress, Betty Weathers. When Stormy, Betty's separated husband, finds out about Gene, he comes to her house with destruction in mind. Throughout *Short Cuts*, Altman utilizes the ensemble cast and mosaic structure to weave together each theme, showing the audience that these issues are apparent throughout all walks of life. For example, a later scene where Sherri—Gene's wife—confesses to her sister Marian that Gene is cheating again, meaning that her marriage is falling apart because of infidelity, is cross cut with this scene of destruction, as a house literally falling to pieces with Stormy Weathers taking a chainsaw to Betty Weather's furniture.

Like Carver's character Al before him, Altman's Gene Shepard is adulterous because he suffers from an identity crisis. At a loss in recognizing the genesis of his internal conflict, Gene blames his family and their dog, Suzy. Gene, an LAPD officer, is unhappiest when at home and often finds himself arguing and yelling with his wife, despite their children's presence. He has become a pathological liar, which developed to help hide his relationship with Betty. His infidelity runs deeper than his relationship with Betty, and while working, he spends time roaming the city joyfully hitting on women. As in the source text, unsure of the root of his unhappiness, Gene takes his frustration out on Suzy the dog. In the story, Al takes Suzy out to his childhood neighborhood and releases her, turning and driving away. Carver's Al has more of a redeeming quality to him because the reader has background knowledge of his loss of his childhood dog. Here, he even asks out loud, "Is there still a chance for me?" (Carver, *Short Cuts* 136.) Carver's character understands that he is unhappy and wants help through his frustrations. But in Altman's film, Gene's actions remain reckless and expose him as a detached individual, isolated and angry. Only after all have abandoned him does Gene try to fix his wrongs and find Suzy, as an attempt to calm the tension in his household. Unlike in Carver's story, Altman's character is able to locate the dog and return it to his family; with this action, Altman implies that there actually is hope for redemption in all.

This exploration of identity crisis is made visible on the screen in previous Altman films as well, showing that Altman is not only engaging with Carver, but also expanding his own common tropes. In *M\*A\*S\*H*, Captain "Painless" Waldowski goes through a crisis, finding himself at a loss for who he is and why he has made the decisions in life he has; he decides to end his life, but takes a placebo in place of a

cyanide cap. *Nashville* details several different characters trying to find themselves. In their world, the answer is to flock to the city of Nashville and make it into the music business; here, fame equals self-understanding and fulfillment. The entire population of the fictional town in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* is at a loss until John McCabe, a traveling loner, comes in and reinvents the town and provides its citizens with purpose.

Back in the world of *Short Cuts*, Claire Kane of “So Much Water So Close to Home” is also at a loss for how the things in life have gotten to the point that they are in her life. But her concern is less for herself and more—just like the character she is based on—for her husband Stuart, showing the point where Altman and Carver agree: the struggle to find one’s self is more often than not a part of masculinity. In Carver’s text the reader is told the events of Stuart’s fishing trip. While away for three days, a body is found. Instead of calling the cops, Stuart and his pals decided to wait until the end of their trip because they felt, after their long day of hiking and the fact that the girl was already dead, it was too late to help: “They pleaded fatigue, the late hour, the fact that the girl ‘wasn’t going anywhere.’ In the end they all decided to stay. They went ahead and set up camp and built a fire and drank their whiskey” (71). Versus a page and a half summation of Stuart’s events from Claire’s perspective, Altman shows the details of the camping trip in his film (in segments throughout the duration of the film’s first 90-minutes), which amounts to most of the adaptive aspect of this text.

With the switch in perspective, Altman forces the audience to be less objective. The text, in first person, puts the reader in confidence with Claire, confused and lost as to who Stuart is in attempt to understand his actions. Conversely, rather than siding with Claire by necessity of point of view, when, in *Short Cuts*, the audience sees Stuart and his



camping comrades' actions and the body first hand—even at one point witnessing the dead girl being urinated on—more pathos is injected into the audience's experience. Altman's exploration of identity crisis with these two characters makes it easier for the audience to pass judgment on Stuart. Further, Altman's exploration with the characters in this story establishes a villainous nature in men, a feature found in several of his previous films.

### C. Using Carver to Explore Altman: Women and Sexuality in *Short Cuts*

When adapting Carver's work, Altman is engaging the text in conversation, and Altman has something additionally to say about women and sexuality. Placing *Short Cuts* in the context of the early 1990s (versus Carver's 60s, 70s, and 80s) allows Altman to engage Carver's work in a culture discussion on gender roles and how certain aspects of gender ideology has shifted. Altman's new and opposing interpretation of Carver's women was to be expected, given his history of portraying strong women, versus that of Carver's more male-centric literature. In Altman's first major feature film *M\*A\*S\*H*, the character of Major Margaret 'Hot Lips' Houlihan started a conversation over Altman's depiction of women that lasted his career, with often the word *misogynist* thrown around. In *M\*A\*S\*H*, Hot Lips' male peers torment her, even to the point of public humiliation when she is exposed fully nude in front of the entire platoon as a prank removes the walls to the shower house.<sup>25</sup> But Altman depicts life as it was. The men in her army unit toyed with Hot Lips because that was the common case of the 1970s, a time where woman were not shown respect in the work place. What Altman does with his film is portray the real-life misogyny on screen, but gives the actress Sally Kellerman a chance to give her interpretation as a rebuttal, showing that woman can and do have a voice. Hot Lips was

originally a bit part in the script, as in the novel, but Altman allowed Kellerman to advance her character through improvisation, refuting the passive nature of woman that the script originally called for. Hot Lips screams and shouts; she reports every incident and calls out every man who mistreats her or one of her nurses. Kellerman recalls, “The shower scene *changed* Hot Lips. And me, I couldn’t have felt more loved and more appreciated as a women”; and Matthew Modine, a frequent Altman actor collaborator, comments that “[Altman] appreciated woman, he showed their character and strength. It’s the men who are so fucked up, not the women in his films. The men pull back the curtain on Hot Lips...[Altman is] exposing something about men, not about women” (Zuckoff 186). In allowing his actors free range to develop their performance and present them how each individual actress interprets the text, Altman remains objective,<sup>26</sup> present behind the camera only to capture life—much like Carver, who never criticized or ridiculed his characters for their flaws, but only presented them as true to life representations.

Altman’s depiction of women with agency is apparent throughout all his filmography, so the fact that the women of *Short Cuts* exert power is not too surprising.<sup>27</sup> Altman takes Carver’s women and gives them power, showing the opposite side of the conversation on gender and power that Carver began, while, as Modine stated above, portraying men as reckless beings. This was not apparent to all, though: Rita Kempley, for *The Washington Post*, claimed that, “‘Short Cuts’ is a cynical, sexist and shallow work from cinema’s premier misanthrope...who here shows neither compassion for—nor insight into—the human condition.” (qtd in. Zuckoff 421). But something different is found in a scene where two characters from each of the core stories meet; Officer Gene

Shepard pulls over Claire Kane, who works a professional clown.<sup>28</sup> Gene asserts his authoritative power over Claire by asking for her phone number and refusing to give a legitimate reason for pulling her over. Instead he toys with her, asking, “How many clowns can you fit this car, ma’am?” and stating, “I can use some cheering up from time to time myself...Being a cop isn’t easy” (Altman, *Short Cuts*). Claire remains poised and willing to answer any questions, she even begins to stick up for herself and shows attitude, unwilling to break down beneath Gene’s pressure. The scene cuts immediately to *Captain Planet* on screen at Betty Weather’s home where a villainous character proclaims, “If there’s anything I like more than being mean, it’s being sneaky!” This is Altman stepping outside of his objective realm to show his preference for his female characters—the woman is the one who can fight the villain.<sup>29</sup>

Further, Altman’s use of female nudity is not that of a misogynistic, misanthropic boy playing with the human body, but an artist who appreciates women and who allows his female characters to use their anatomy as an exertion of power, rather than a point of weakness. In a scene where Marian Wymn (from “Will You Please Be Quiet Please”) works on a figure painting of her live nude subject, her sister Sherri Shepard, Dr. Ralph Wyman, who is generally aggressive, walks in and becomes noticeably distracted by the woman’s nude presence. The two women pick up Ralph’s uncomfortable but infatuated tone with Sherri’s nudity and beg questions of him, drawing him closer to them and holding him in their presence. After conversing with his wife, stuttering all the while, he stops talking and walks away. The woman burst into laughter.

Female sexuality as power is also a strong element of the Kaiser household. Lois (a new embodiment of the character Patti from Carver’s text “Vitamins,” and the only

element pulled from that story) must work a side job from home to help support her family. In the text, Patti sells multi vitamins as a remedy to help those in need, but in Altman's film, Lois is a phone sex operator who often plays the master role when conversing sadomasochistic scenarios. Lois's character shows Altman's belief in the healing elements and power of female sexuality. Lois claims that her job is good for money and that it "keeps 'em [sexual deviants] off the streets" (Altman, *Short Cuts*). Additionally, the way in which Lois flaunts her profession in front of her disapproving husband Jerry, mocking him when he questions her, shows that women in this film often have a stronger sense of agency than men.

In a later scene again with the Wymans, one of the most commonly critiqued scenes from *Short Cuts* for its use of nudity, Marian stands half nude (only wearing a blouse) for nearly five minutes through a confrontational dialogue with her husband. The scene is prefaced with Ralph's uncomfortableness with nudity, asking why Marian, "Why does naked make it art?" (Altman, *Short Cuts*) While she is partially nude, Ralph drills Marian with questions about a previous affair she committed. In Carver's texts, Ralph begs the same questions of Marian while staring her down, "watch[ing] her hips under the plaid woolen skirt" and how "her breasts push[ed] at her blouse" (Carver, *Short Cuts* 51-2). Carver's scene also includes flashbacks to the night of the incident, where Ralph physically strikes Marian and draws blood from her mouth. In his film, Altman takes a different approach, giving Marian the upper-hand through the use of her physical person. As an allusion to the blood spilled in the source text, Marian has wine spilled on her skirt, which causes her to strip and this now puts her in control of the situation. Once Marian is satisfied with her stance in the argument, she becomes fully clothed again, Ralph lowers

his voice and relaxes his tone, and with a look of defeat he leaves the room: the woman wins.

#### D. The Grand Finale

*"Here's to lemonade."*

In the end, the ensemble-mosaic film structure of *Short Cuts* amounts to Altman's view of human connection. In Altman's world, there is a necessity for community. Applying this sense of community to *Short Cuts* forms an antithesis to Raymond Carver's desire to isolate his characters. In Altman's world, isolation kills, whereas community brings peace and prosperity to the loner. Major Frank Burns in *M\*A\*S\*H* retreats from his fellow soldiers and as his name appropriately suggest, he burns out and away. The comradery of Hawkeye Pierce, Trapper John McIntyre, and Duke Forrest is what keeps their spirits high and gets these men through the war. Major Margret 'Hot Lips' Houlihan nearly dissolves under the pressure of isolation—that is, isolation through ridicule—but she fights back and earns a place among the community of men, preserving herself. *Nashville* portrays a city where individuals come to join the community of country music, and if you cannot make it into the community you will perish. What Altman saw in Carver is a world where characters remains isolated and disheveled and they need to be helped: *Short Cuts* is his answer.

The final moments of the film, which unfold through a *deus ex machina*-like natural disaster, show Altman's enjoyment with concepts of connectivity one final time. Mirroring the helicopters of the opening sequence that spray the Malathion over the entire city, an earthquake too brings together the entire cast in one final moment. In the end, it is the community that feels the biggest, hardest, most shattering effect. This final

sequence takes the cast out of isolation and brings them together, while stepping in to condemn Jerry for a heinous act he just committed: murder. The rumbling begins as Jerry—who along with Bill has left his wife and kids alone in the park on their picnic, attempting to woo two women—strikes a woman in the head with a rock, beating her to the ground as Bill attempts to intervene.<sup>30</sup> As this occurs, Lois and Honey scamper to protect their children from any potential debris; Anne and Howard, in the bakeshop after finding a moment of clarity in their time of loss, huddle together with the baker to protect themselves; Gene stands in his backyard with his hands on his hips like a mighty hero shouting through a bullhorn for his neighbors to remain calm and find shelter while Sherri protects the children; Tess sings out while holding herself steady and Zoe's cello crashes to the ground; the Wymans and the Kanes console each other in a hottub, as Stuart claims "It's not the big one," ending each couple's quarrel for a moment as they embrace for protection (Altman, *Short Cuts*); Betty, still hysterical from finding the destruction of her house, huddles down, holding her son close as the only remaining furniture intact from Stormy's rampage falls to the ground and shatters; Earl and Doreen, drunk and sublime, laugh and embrace under a doorway and Earl exclaims, "We're going out together" (Altman, *Short Cuts*). Post earthquake, the Wymans and the Kanes drink tequila, and Ralph toasts "Here's to lemonade" (Altman, *Short Cuts*). The camera pans right to show a bright, daytime skyline of Los Angeles, and once again "Prisoners of Love" underscores, this time as the end credits role. The image of Los Angeles fades as the credits continue superimposed over maps of L.A.

## VI. Shining a New Light on Carver

What Altman and *Short Cuts* ultimately do is give the texts' reader a new perspective on Carver to consider. Linda Hutcheon writes that adaptations help the source texts survive; akin to the theory of evolution, adaptations help stories evolve and adapt. "[C]ultural adaptation involves migration to favorable conditions: stories travel to different cultures and different media...stories adapt just as they are adapted" (31). It is sensible for artists to explore new artistic media with previous stories as it has the possibility to expose new insight on the source. After analyzing the narrative aspects of the film, a return to Altman's auteur style further shows how his interpretations affected the viewer and how it brings about a new vision and interpretation to the source texts. Altman's overall choices with the film—moving cameras, explosive audio, constant scene shifting—bring out a jazz-like rendering, fast and messy, seemingly lacking in construction to what was once Carver's calm, quiet world. With *Short Cuts*, Altman has shown his audience that adaptations suggest evolution, and, as a filmmaker with a distinct go-to style, there is constant evolution of skill.

Success for an adaptation is subjective, just as is the parameters of success within each art form vary. What was considered culturally significant and important for success with Carver's original stories differs greatly from the requirements for success associated with Altman's films. But as an adaptation, based on the approach utilized in this essay—an approach built on the analysis of the intertextual dialogue between the two artists and of Altman's career paratexts—*Short Cuts* is a successful adaptation because it shows an interpretation that brings out a new vision on Carver's source texts. In an interview

with Robert Stewart for *The New York Times*, Altman states “[w]hen you read [Carver’s work]...you are taking this information...in and adding it to all the information that already exists in your brain [...] I translate what I saw in Carver’s work...I’m trying to take an experience that I had in reading these stories and use elements and pieces of them to give a similar experience to a film audience” (3). *Short Cuts* stands as more than a transfer of the stories to the screen. The elements of the film not only help to expand Altman’s specific vision of the human condition, but are also part of a critical interpretation that analyzes and allows the audience to see an opposite side of the commonly inferred claims in Carver’s texts.



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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Ebert, Review of *Short Cuts*.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Gibson on Altman incessantly avoiding the question, "What did you mean in the film?" qtd. in Zuckoff 581-2.

<sup>3</sup> Though it should be noted that Carver disliked the generic title of minimalism. He preferred to dub his work that of "Dirty Realism," a term Bill Buford coined in 1983 when discussing the works of Carver and Charles Bukowski.

<sup>4</sup> October 8, 1993

<sup>5</sup> There are of course many other issues, but fidelity remains the major point of discussion when analyzing previous publications of *Short Cuts*.

<sup>6</sup> The title is a misnomer, claiming that the filmmaker and the author are opposing forces, when actually they should be viewed, to a degree, as partners.

<sup>7</sup> This signature is a quirk that has been duplicated by several modern directors, Peter Jackson and M. Night Shaymalan come to mind. With this, directors make allusions to not only previous films but also previous filmmakers themselves. This also stands as an attempt for the filmmakers to try and equate intellect.

<sup>8</sup> "Foreword" *Short Cuts: the Screenplay*. Tess Gallagher, 8.

<sup>9</sup> When filming *Short Cuts*, Altman informed actress Jennifer Jason Leigh on her lines as the sex phone operator, "I need you to fill it out," because the script is just a blueprint (Zuckoff 774).

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<sup>10</sup> *A Wedding* (1978), *Short Cuts* (1993), *Prêt-à-Porter* (1994), *Kansas City* (1996), *Gosford Park* (2001), *The Company* (2003), and his final film, *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006).

<sup>11</sup> Best Picture, Best Director, Best Film Editing, and Best Actress in a Supporting Role for Sally Kellerman's performance as Major Margaret 'Hot Lips' Houlihan. *M\*A\*S\*H* lost the former three categories to *Patton*, also a war film; and Helen Hayes took home the acting statuette for her supporting role in *Airport*.

<sup>12</sup> January 24, 1970.

<sup>13</sup> Academy Award nominations for *Nashville* include Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Supporting Actress for both Lily Tomlin and Ronee Blakley. Keith Carradine won Best Original Song for composing the "I'm Easy," which his character sings in the film; Altman required that all of the actors write and perform their own characters' music.

<sup>14</sup> March 3, 1975.

<sup>15</sup> "Collaborating with Carver." Altman, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Maryann Elise Burk, married to Carver from 1957-1982.

<sup>17</sup> In many ways this is similar to Sherwood Anderson's "grotesque." See *Winesburg, Ohio*.

<sup>18</sup> In the publication, the stories, with the exception of the poem "Lemonade," actually sit in a sequential order anchored in the center of the collection, surrounded on both sides by their supporting characters.

<sup>19</sup> July 29, 1993.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Altman, 1970.

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<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that Tess and Zoe Trainer are not of Carver's world, but of Altman and Frank Barhydt's creation.

<sup>22</sup> This alteration has since become one of most critically panned aspects of *Short Cuts*.

<sup>23</sup> Cinema vérité is a documentary style of filmmaking that came about in the 1960s in France. Often described as having a "fly on the wall" feeling, the attempt is place the viewer in the space and withhold nothing. It is considered one of the most honest styles of filmmaking.

<sup>24</sup> This is not to say that Carver never wrote about successful professionals—one of Carver's best received, often anthologized stories "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" deals with four successful professional. It is just often that he is associated with the down and out.

<sup>25</sup> This is a scene that is not present in Hooker's novel.

<sup>26</sup> Though his editing may prove otherwise, as the next paragraph with discuss.

<sup>27</sup> The film is even mediated, to some degree, by woman. Altman's only two original characters out of the main cast are two female musicians whose music is heard throughout the film.

<sup>28</sup> So the story goes, Claire is now envisioned as a clown simply because it gave her character something to do. Further, this new characterization gave reason to have Claire in the cake shop at the same time as Stormy Weathers and Ann Finnigan, and again gave reason to have Claire at the hospital near the dying boy, a juxtaposition of Stuart near the dead girl.

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<sup>29</sup> The credits also show Altman's preference, with the actresses of the film billed above their male costars. What's more, nodding to the fact that the gender roles have been blurred, Suzy the dog has been made male in the film, while, as the name suggests, is a female in the short story.

<sup>30</sup> Is Jerry inherently evil or did his wife push him too far? Is this moment of Altman's antithesis of the power women have through their sexuality, stating that it can be liberating, but also more detrimental to the community because of the effect it brings about in men?