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The Politics of the "Open" Self: America in the Cinema of King Vidor and Robert Altman

Few filmmakers have had the career longevity and success to create a body of work that deserves our attention for its serious political commentary. Two exceptions are King Vidor and Robert Altman. These individuals, whose collective output spans the full century of American film production, thoughtfully and skillfully brought their visions of American life and its implications for politics to the screen. Indeed, both accomplished what might be thought of as the triple crown of cinema—capturing essential elements of the nation's political values and behavior, effectively communicating their unique perspective through film, and influencing America's political consciousness.

As different as their approaches and times were, the films of King Vidor and of Robert Altman have much in common. Both were *auteur* directors,[1] who experienced many difficulties trying to work within the studio system of their time. Both loved all aspects of making movies, and each infused his work with distinctive themes and style. Commentators view both as technical innovators in the art of filmmaking, who purposely left "holes" in their characterizations and stories that would challenge the viewer to engage in dialectic with the film. Form and content found themselves intricately integrated in their work. Further, they relied on an interesting and gripping blend of documentary and fictional features in their films. Most importantly for purposes of this study, they share an initial position on the nature of the American "self," a position that strongly influenced their under

standing of and approach to the political world. Rooted in a similar Myth of America, both directors' films portray "open" selves who experience difficulty handling mass society and the politics of the organization age. Their work provides cogent evidence for Lipset's argument that "culture matters"—both mass culture and the culture of "politically relevant" elites (Lipset, 2004: 187)—and Sheldon Wolin's view that a community's political health depends on its citizens' unity with others and unity with oneself (Wolin, 2004: chapter 10).

The Myth of America and the American "Self"

To these directors America is an idea. The idea of America—its myth—includes many components. Most basic is the belief that American liberal democracy is the city on the hill, an exceptional political and social experiment that should be an example to all others. As Seymour Martin Lipset put it, liberal democracy is "the good society itself in operation" (Lipset, 1963: 439). In liberal democracy every human being possesses an inherent worth and dignity that must be respected. Therefore, equality, freedom, and individualism are essential aspects of the American idea. If one is talented, hard working, and virtuous, success will follow and will reverberate throughout the community. There is a common good that emerges from each individual's pursuit of her own private good as long as the individual remains rooted within a community. For in the Myth of America (a myth that existed before Weber named it the Protestant work ethic), individual success is nurtured and supported by the family and the community. And because the successful individual is grateful for that love, loyalty, and nurture, she will "give back" to the community through service, patriotism, obedience to the law, and support of those who have helped her.[2]

At the same time, this myth contains many contradictions, contradictions observed by both visitors (Crèvecoeur and Tocqueville) and modern political scientists and sociologists (Lipset, Potter). Americans may appear to be both idealistic and materialistic, in search of freedom and in search of an escape from freedom, individualistic and conformist, supporters and opponents of individual civil rights, and equally committed to equality and to status.

This article argues that a certain type of consciousness underlies the

Myth of America and the American national character (with all its contradictions). Further, the films of King Vidor and Robert Altman show an insightful sensitivity to the potential consequences of that form of consciousness in a mass society—one characterized by what Max Weber called the rationalization of life with its disenchantment of the world, the routinization of daily life, and the fragmentation of social life in which the goals are efficiency, predictability, and the ability to calculate the means to achieving desired ends. This is the very sort of society that Alexis de Tocqueville believed would result in feelings of powerlessness and apathy but that Lipset argued would strengthen democratic consensus.

The political philosopher Eric Voegelin helps us gain insight into the consciousness that lies at the heart of the Myth of America. Voegelin's study of what he called the "American mind" led him to adopt the philosophical pragmatists' categorization of the American mind as an "open self" (Voegelin, 1995: 9). The open self is non-dialectical rather than self-reflective. It is sociable in that it seeks closeness with others and prefers the company of others to being alone. And the open self is outer-directed in that it seeks approval from those with whom it develops a sense of closeness or community and directs its actions toward service to or acceptance by the larger group. In Lipset's terms Americans are "sensitive" to others' judgment (1963: 449). The closed self, on the other hand, is dialectical, allowing its attitudes and beliefs to be challenged and engaging in dialogue with people, the culture, and the physical world. Neither form of the self is intrinsically preferable, but each carries implications. Both compete for attention in America's social and political consciousness and their interaction is the source of the contradictions in American values.

It is a democracy of open selves that is evident in the films of both King Vidor and Robert Altman. Their films display an ambiguous response to the open self and to the Myth of America on which it rests. On the one hand the open self is receptive to the notions of equality, cooperation, and sharing—especially within the context of the expanding frontier. On the other hand, the open self, because it may idolize like-mindedness, often results in closure toward difference and change accompanied by loneliness, restless divertissement, and alienation. It undervalues theory, objectivity, and asking "the impertinent questions" (Altman, *Tanner '88*). Further, in the face of mass society, the open self seems to lack the necessary resources to anchor a happy and meaningful life.

Robert Altman and King Vidor begin with a similar Myth of America, and viewers can find in their films evidence of the American preference for the open self. However, the films of both directors suggest two concerns regarding modernity's effects on the myth and on the consciousness that permeate American political and social ideas. The first concern centers on the loss of opportunities in a mass society for individual achievement—of any chance for separating oneself from the crowd within organizations that promise equal treatment and neutral criteria for selection and promotion but function as oligarchies (Michels, 2009). The second concern is the individual's inability to find the kind of closeness, communication, and community required if an open self is to find happiness. These two explicit concerns suggest a third, implicit, concern displayed in both Vidor's and Altman's work—liberal democracy's contemporary confusion of consensus with conformity and its subsequent implications for democratic citizenship.

Their work presents important questions for contemporary American political science and sociology. Vidor and Altman might very well agree with Lipset that institutions supportive of both conflict and consensus are important for the success of liberal democracy. Their concern would be how to incorporate them into the daily life of the open self. Altman and Vidor want us to understand that the bases of conflict and consensus are rooted in consciousness. Their films often awaken us to the dangers facing an open self in any society in which there are few outlets for the development of genuine consensus. One may need more than opportunity and hard work to succeed in such a world and the bases for genuine sociality are undermined. What Altman and Vidor demonstrate is the destructive tendencies of conformity in the absence of genuine consensus and community.

King Vidor

King Vidor's films (except *War and Peace* and *Solomon and Sheba*) take the myth of America as their starting point and look at people trying to live it.[3] He has been called both right-wing and left-wing, but actually his work does not embody any ideology. Vidor's films generally demonstrate concern for lower middle class people in a variety of circumstances and environments. His films also exhibit a sense that moral community

is important. Plot summaries can make his films seem almost stunningly simplistic and banal. In that sense it is hard to do justice to his films. Far from being either simplistic or banal, King Vidor focuses on the complications present in apparently simple social and/or moral situations. His films often are examples of art as witness. Vidor's films view morality as complex; a connecting thread in his films is acceptance of "widely divergent, even opposite moral attitudes as spiritual integrity" (Durgnat and Simmon 2). Vidor's themes are freedom versus necessity, self in relation to community, ideas versus emotions, the advantages and costs of progress, spirituality versus religion, the vitality and weaknesses of the mass, and humanity versus nature. He seems to view these themes as a mosaic. Each individual film picks out one or two aspects of the mosaic to highlight, but most of these themes generally play some role in every film from 1925 (the period of his late silent films, such as *The Crowd* and *The Big Parade*) through 1955. He seems to be saying to us: "If we looked at the situation in terms of this person's perspective, what would it look like?" Or, what if necessity complicated the situation in this way? Or, what if this event happened to a strong person rather than a weak one? Instead of presenting answers, Vidor gives his audience glimpses of the contradictions of felt experience. He expects audiences to "understand that conflicting emotions comprise a kind of dialectic…rather than a logical consistency" (Durgnat and Simmon 13). And sometimes he seems to suggest that even sin may be redemptive.

One can understand King Vidor's films best by examining them from the framework of the open self. *The Crowd* exemplifies Vidor's approach. In an early scene in *The Crowd* an eclectic group of young boys (black, white, round, thin, light, dark) is speculating on what they want to be when they grow up. Johnny Sims's (born on July 4, 1900) answer is that his father says Johnny is "going to be somebody big." In the next scene Johnny's father is dead and in the next a grown John is crossing over to New York City on the ferry, about to start his working life. One of his fellow passengers warns him that "you have to be good to make it there" to which John responds "All I need is an opportunity."

The opening shots of the city are overwhelming. As seen from the boat, the city is a pleasant looking place. As seen from the streets, it is a huge, brooding, ominous presence. John works as an anonymous clerk at desk 137 on a floor filled with the desks of other anonymous clerks. On

his first date with his future wife, Mary, he shows her the crowd on the street. His comment is "Look at that crowd—poor boobs, all in the same rut." That same evening he sees a clown in a sandwich board and makes fun of him, saying "I bet his father told him he'd be president." He and Mary marry and have two children. After his first child is born, he tells his wife that the birth was the impetus he needed; he will "be somebody now, I promise." He always believes he is about to make good, that his ship is about "to come in." But there he is, stuck in the same rut as the rest of the crowd. In five years he receives an $8 /week raise. He is not becoming "somebody." Finally, he wins an advertising contest jingle. But the money he wins brings only tragedy. He calls to his children, who are playing down on the street, to come in and see what he has bought them with his windfall. Crossing the street, his youngest child is hit by a truck and killed. No one on the street seems to care. Life goes on around him just as before, and it becomes obvious that "We do not know how big the crowd is and what opposition it is until we get out of step with it" (*The Crowd*). After that, John no longer can focus at work and loses his job. He is totally out of step with the crowd and begins a downward spiral that takes him to the brink of suicide. But his young son expresses belief in him, and John begins to fight his way back. The job he takes is a juggling sandwich board clown—the very job he ridiculed earlier in the film. He still believes that all he needs is an opportunity. In the final scene, he uses some of his first earnings at this new job to take his wife and son to the vaudeville show at which he sits next to his first friend in the city, who did move up in the firm for which they both had worked. In the last shot, Vidor pans back from the family to show the entire audience, all of them laughing at the vaudeville sketch.

Everybody, it seems, believes they can "be somebody." That is the promise of America. That promise is reinforced by the foundational belief that every human being has inherent dignity and moral worth. The problem is that there are so many of us. In a mass society, one has to "be good to make it." We constantly are struggling to show how different, how "special" we are. Our private views of ourselves, our sense of who we are, and our private little worlds constantly are under attack, especially in the city where so many of us congregate. It is almost impossible to overcome the isolation of city life—to make ourselves more than just another anonymous piece of the crowd. Most of us just are not tough enough, motivated enough, or talented enough to be that "somebody." We lack the vitality or we turn that

vitality into something self-destructive. To Vidor, we are creatures more of sentiment than of reason. We must become humble, accept our place in life's hierarchy, and rely on the small communities we form, especially family, to provide meaning in our lives.

These same ideas are present in *Our Daily Bread* and *An American Romance*. Both another John Sims (*Our Daily Bread*) and Steve Dangos *(An American Romance*) will take the risk that comes along with opportunity and, each rooted by the community he has founded, will find meaning. Both are films about the American dream and the individual who is willing to take risks, seize opportunity, succeed, and carry with him those (family, friends, and colleagues) who believe in him. The leader shares many of the characteristics of the open self but sees the tendency of the open self to passivity and conformity and rejects both. Yet each leader possesses some flaw that he must overcome with the help of family and some form of community.

In King Vidor's films nothing is shown without its contradiction. *The Wizard of Oz* is an accessible example. Vidor took over responsibility for shooting most of the black and white sequence of this film (as well as the final approach to Oz through the poppy field). This sequence of the film depicts all the vitality of nature, including human beings—a vitality that, through its excesses, can be either a positive and creative force (rain) or a destructive one (tornado). Dorothy's emotions are as tempestuous as the weather and also swing from the negative to the positive, the destructive to the creative. Through these scenes the viewer becomes emotionally as well as rationally acquainted with the place of this individual within a community. We see her place in a group, how that group feels about her, her strengths and weaknesses. We see how much she is loved. An immediate bond is forged that will carry the viewer through the rest of the film. We see the genuinely nice farmhands with their common sense, people-oriented morality and the morally conventional Miss Gulch's destructive righteous anger. Nature is an overwhelming force that may thwart one's best efforts. Emotion may often get the better of reason. But everything in life is not stimulus and response. There are choices to be made about handling the natural and social limitations that every human being faces. There is wisdom in the humbug and in the humblest, smallest, and weakest person. And we see in Miss Gulch's use of the law to seek revenge on Dorothy through Toto that civilization with its rules of comity does not always nurture the

human spirit or bring justice. Materialism and self-interest compete with genuine virtue.

The competing perspectives on these basic themes are present in all his films, but most prominently in the more personal projects he completed outside the confines of the studio system: *The Crowd, The Big Parade, Our Daily Bread*, and *Hallelujah*. King Vidor seems to suggest to us that the American self is primarily an open one, but that elements of the closed self exist side by side, although not always peacefully, with its more open aspects. We see within ourselves, as well as between individuals, competition between sentiment and reason, the desire for sociability and for isolation (for being one of the crowd and special), egotism and capacity for self-sacrifice, self-destruction and resiliency, and the force of both civilization and the wilderness. Most interestingly, we can see how these contradictions arise from elements located within the paradigm of the open self. The elements of sociability and desire for intimacy in relations with fellow human beings and with a personal god are what make the world human for us. These elements allow a sort of friendship among citizens. Human beings may be alone in the world, but we are alone together. Our aims are similar. We seem to be moving through our private space in concert and harmony with those around us. We can find human companionship and community, and the moral and social conventions arising from those forms of sociability and intimacy will ground us in the world. Together human beings can oppose their will to that of necessity and sometimes win the game. The practical application of theory allows that result, as does some subordination of the individual's desires to the common good. The human world is a whole. There are limits, but human beings experience freedom.

However, the open self's emphasis on sociability, intimacy, the priority of practice over theory, and a stubborn intellectualism that refuses to re-think its own premises also presents dangers. Passivity and conformity may result from deformed focus on sociability. As a result the open self may have a tendency to allow social injustices to continue and prevent new ideas from being accepted. The open self may confuse moral equality with equality of talent and refuse to listen or honor individual excellence. The focus on practicality may in the end choke off the kind of theoretical thinking on which practical invention always rests. In King Vidor's films, characters restlessly search for some balance between individuality and community, between the open self and the closed one. He celebrates the

positive aspects of the American mind, including its openness. However, he also warns us of both its dangers for society and for the individual who does not fit—dangers heightened in a mass society.

Those who ignore this advice do so at their peril (*Hallelujah!, Ruby Gentry, Duel in the Sun*, for example). They will destroy themselves. Still, each individual has some gift that in the right social setting might shine. The "crowd" is basically decent and responsible. *Our Daily Bread*, in particular, demonstrates this aspect of Vidor's work. What democracy really offers us, it suggests, is opportunity—the chance for the individual of pluck and talent to succeed no matter what his origins or current circumstances. But we have to be willing to innovate and take risks, and we must remain rooted in some idea of the common good. Individuals possess moral equality, not an equality of talent. Sometimes, the crowd fails to recognize its limitations and that it needs inspired leadership by an individual with strength of mind and bold new ideas, but it is capable of insight (see *The Fountainhead* for an example).

Robert Altman

Where King Vidor told a straightforward story, Robert Altman tends toward the episodic and anecdotal.[4] Altman seems drawn to themes that also interested King Vidor, including the effect of modernity, especially city life, on the open self and on the possibility of community; self-destruction and resiliency; the corruption of "the system" through greed and egotism coupled with a corresponding loss of private and public virtue; the vitality and weakness of the mass; and freedom versus necessity. Altman's films witness an open self that has fallen victim to all the problems of which King Vidor warned us. He shows viewers the fate of an open self who attempts to live as an unencumbered self (See Sandel, 1984). As Altman stated in several interviews, he showed on the screen what he saw as true and real, often using a semi-documentary style and multiple soundtracks to heighten the sense of reality (Sterrit).

In his films there are no longer any roots, any real sense of community. The mass has been deadened and coarsened until it is almost hopeless to try to evoke a positive response from it. We no longer see any connections among us. Leaders fail as well. The "great man" always fails us. Greed

and materialism on the part of individuals, government, the military,and corporations belie the promise of America. Public space is non-existent. Culture is the site of politics, and there is no way for the individual or for new ideas to challenge the existing system. Altman said he made comedies, but they are tragic comedies of the absurd. We take ourselves so seriously, he seems to say, yet we ignore and destroy the sources of our humanity and everything that we really ought to be taking seriously.

Robert Altman wants to provoke thought and pull the viewer into the story as participant in the situation faced by the characters. He wants to know whether what he has put on the screen disturbs the viewer as much as it disturbs him. *M.A.S.H., Streamers, Short Cuts, McCabe and Mrs. Miller, Nashville,* and *The Player* suggest that America is sick—very sick. Greed is the root of that sickness, a greed that has been present throughout American history and has subverted all ideals and institutions.[5] Ultimately, Altman's films leave one wondering whether human beings are not all frauds and murderers and whether the country as a whole is not engaged in some sort of common suicide pact. No matter how good our intentions, as long as we live in solipsistic little worlds frantically trying to protect ourselves, we cannot help but harm one another, often to the point of death.

If one were looking for the origins of this personal and social disorder, Altman seems to suggest we look no farther than *Secret Honor*, which follows a hypothetical typical late evening during Richard Nixon's retirement at San Clemente. Altman called this film a political myth. If it is a myth, it one about the origins of American society and politics—institutions Nixon appears to see as flawed from the beginning. The real sins of the Committee of One Hundred, Nixon believes in the film, were that its members were nouveau riche and without long-standing social connections. The founders were no different from Charles 'Bebe' Rebozo. Neither was Nelson Rockefeller, Dwight Eisenhower, or John F. Kennedy. Power is the ultimate dream of politics. And in trying for that delicate balance of power and justice, justice never stood any genuine chance. "I really did want to grow up to be Abraham Lincoln," Nixon muses. The Nixon of this film sees himself as a man of the crowd, upholding the American dream of individual advancement through hard work. And he sees himself as a hero sacrificing himself for the good of that dream and the possible redemption of the country, as choosing "secret honor, public shame." If he had not resigned, The Committee of One Hundred would have brokered a new

constitutional amendment abolishing presidential term limits and seen to it that Nixon was drafted for a third, and possibly a fourth term. The committee's members would have done this in order to protect drug profits because they had made Nixon and therefore could "control" him. In the film Nixon appears to believe he was the only one in the government (maybe in the country) ultimately interested in justice. Conspiracy theory, paranoia, and delusions of grandeur aside, this film makes the viewer confront the spiritual substance of this country (or its lack). The myth of America is just that—myth. Greed has usurped the Protestant work ethic. Political realism has trumped the use of power for right. Freedom has become license. A belief in individual rights has been replaced by the view that we are all victims. A purely egoistic form of self-actualization has taken the place of self-reliance. Instrumental reason has replaced the rational examination of means and ends. Instead of working toward a better society, we seek to immanentize paradise. Instead of government by consent of the governed, we have government by mass opinion—Schumpeter's performance democracy in which citizens care only whether their politicians deliver on promises of material prosperity (Schumpeter, 1942). American life is totally dominated by the modern project and citizens really do not care.

For Altman, that sickness pervades every aspect of American life—music, politics, film, the exploration of new frontiers, and the heart of private life. *Short Cuts* follows the stories of eight couples and a mother and daughter. Each twosome has its own set of problems, but combining their stories highlights the commonalities of the issues they face and intensifies their dilemmas. A metaphor Altman uses in *Short Cuts* highlights his view of the individual in contemporary American life. Jack Lemmon's character, Paul Finnigan, carries an egg around with him. In Altman's films, human beings are like eggs—each egg in its own private little world, every egg fragile, jealous, insecure and easily broken. In fact, like the baker Jerry Kaiser and like Zoe Trainer, we have broken under the pressures of contemporary life. We try to form communities. However, they are fragile and temporary communities of expediency, acting only to incubate the disease and increase the pressures on us. Even family has betrayed us. The title (and theme) of the song that pulls together the film is that we are prisoners of life. Uncertainty is all we rationally can expect. When our egg cracks, what can we expect besides rage and violence? Throughout his films rage and violence are the seemingly inevitable results of the failure of individual

and communal life to live up to the myth.[6]

Even the American military—often cited as the last remaining citadel of honor, community, and the common good in America—has betrayed the myth of America. In both *M.A.S.H.* and *Streamers* there is neither community nor honor. The armed services have fallen prey to hatred and greed for glory and advancement. The military is para noia—beyond reason—a madhouse run by madmen at best and sadists at worst, with the wit and wisdom of high school sophomores. Any genuine sense of community remains inaccessible in these conditions. Rational planning and argument fall before greed. Thus, the only rational reaction to the madness and the power-hungry demand for total control is just as sophomoric as the original exertion of power. Every level of military life exhibits this common societal sickness. *Streamers* revolves around the corrosive effects of racism and homophobia on what should be the core of military community, the platoon. Jealousy and insecurity are the major emotions expressed. Carlyle's words "You got friends…people to talk to…a job. I ain't got nuthin'. Why I got to be here?" could have been uttered by any of the four main characters. The two sergeants, Mooney and Cokes, who spend their days drinking and playing stupid practical jokes, seem to share that view. The only rational response to the madness is the ironic cynicism of *M.A.S.H.'s* Hawkeye and Trapper John.

Nashville applies Robert Altman's favorite themes to America's popular culture through the country and western music industry. He frames the individual stories in relation to the fictional campaign for president of one Hal Phillip Walker, who heads the Replacement Party. Walker maintains we need "new roots" for the nation and advocates citizen engagement with the political rather than apathy. Citizens are involved in politics whether they know it and like it. If the people become involved, there can be change. But the words coming out of his loudspeaker truck have a darker undertone as he tells people on the street that we have a "vital interest in our management." No one seems to see the irony. A genuine leader does not "manage" citizens. Subjects are managed, not citizens.

Two songs set up the political themes that play off one another throughout the film. The first is "200 Years," recorded by one of Nashville's biggest stars. Its refrain "We must be doing something right to last two hundred years" expresses belief in the values of freedom, honor, duty, self-sacrifice, God, and community. The second song's refrain says, "You may say that

I ain't free, but it don't worry me." "It don't worry me" mirrors the apathy of contemporary American politics and the attitude of many citizens that, as long as government does not interfere in their private lives, politics is irrelevant. We will not worry about being managed as long as there are plenty of distractions to keep us busy and the possibility of personal fame. Would-be stars take turns singing during a NASCAR race—completely inaudible over the engine noise. We live in our own worlds, totally unreached and unreachable by others. No one genuinely hears us or wants to hear us. Just as it is too difficult and time-consuming for Del to "listen" to his two deaf children tell him about their day, we might as well all be deaf for as much as we listen to one another.

Over the course of the film Altman reveals a Nashville, and by analogy an America, in which the second song seems truer than the first, even to country music star Haven Hamilton, who "never takes sides politically." He gives money to all political parties and platforms. Barnette, husband and manager of country diva Barbara Jean (ultimately the target and murder victim of a deranged fan), also does not want her associated with any political candidate or idea. Protecting the stars' images in order to enhance record sales is the most important value.

The political campaign itself is not immune to the political corruption that candidate Walker supposedly opposes. Walker's political operative, Triplette, cuts deal after deal in setting up an open-air concert at which the candidate will speak. His manipulation of the would-be country star Suleen Gay demonstrates Triplette's belief that people can be "bought off"—even if it costs them their sense of dignity and self-respect. He hires Suleen to perform at a campaign fundraising function. She thinks she has been hired to sing. In reality Triplette hired her to strip.

In Robert Altman's films, Americans do possess a natural vitality. But contemporary American life does not seem to offer any creative or positive outlets for that vitality. His work assumes an open self that can find no satisfaction of its most human needs and so is corrupted by egotism, isolation, greed, and trivial diversion. Americans yearn for each other, for intimacy and social connection. They yearn for meaningful lives and a relationship with something bigger than themselves. But they can find intimacy and connection nowhere. The desire of the open self for sociability and intimacy, its tendency to discount originality and objectivity in favor of practical work in common with others, has morphed into isolation and, as Robert Kolker

argues, passivity. The tendency of the open self to accept only theories that can be used to solve practical current problems has become the mantra that whatever works is fine. All ideas, even the most cherished and vital pieces of our national myth, are subservient to power and money.

Implications for Politics: Community, Mass Society, and the Open Self

Good narrative art, Nussbaum maintains, helps us understand the "ethical importance of contingency, a deep sense of the problem of conflicting obligations and recognition of the ethical significance of the passions" (Nussbaum 14). Such works do not merely present life; they also represent it as something. They suggest to us "what matters and what does not" (Nussbaum 5). Robert Altman and King Vidor offer us morality tales for the 20th and early 21st centuries and show us the contradictions experienced by the open self as it attempts to find meaning in a correspondingly contradictory national myth. Americans are sociable, non-dialectical and outer-directed. Yet each individual views herself as special. We live in our own little worlds surrounded by jealousy, insecurity, and hostile powers over which we have little or no control. Any sense of community is fragile, impermanent, superficial, and risky. For the most part, however, we are not special. Only a few possess the qualities needed to stand out and take their place in some sort of natural hierarchy of merit. Even they will often fail, falling victim to either some character flaw or the powers that exploit the masses' timorousness, complacency, materialism, and jealousy.

Most of us will retreat into ataraxy— the search for peace through withdrawal from whatever it is that is found disturbing. It is a kind of willing blindness to social, political, and spiritual conditions through finding some other focus for life. The goal is a "resting of the mind" in the face of the breakdown of the political (Voegelin, 1957: 369). Passivity becomes the order of the day. They will focus purely on private life, as Richard Rorty wants the masses in liberal democracies to do. Others will achieve peace through giving up independent judgment to some charismatic group or leader, perhaps a David Koresh or an Aryan Nation. But some, unable to achieve peace in either of these ways, will "chew on themselves" like Dostoevsky's underground man. We can see all these responses in Altman's

and Vidor's films. Some (John in *The Crowd*, the citizenry of *Nashville*, several soldiers in *Streamers*, and Stella Dallas) will withdraw. Others will give up their independent judgment to some leader or, like *Nashville's* Suleen and Albuquerque, some dream. And some will stew in their rage and frustration, sometimes destroying themselves (Zeke in *Hallelujah!*, Billy in *Streamers*, Zoe in *Short Cuts*), sometimes destroying those around them (Jerry and Ralph in *Short Cuts*, Griffin in *The Player*, Sam in *Street Scene* from 1931, Tony in *The Wedding Night,* Warlock in the 1932 *Cynara*), sometimes destroying both (Ruby in *Ruby Gentry,* Carlyle in *Streamers,* Pearl in *Duel in the Sun*, the Richard Nixon of *Secret Honor*).

In the work of both these directors, one sees the divinization of the individual that has its roots in the original American myth's view of human beings as created in the image and likeness of God. The gods are gone. Human beings are the measure of all things. We pull the gods into ourselves and, as Neil Gaiman so aptly illustrates in his novel *American Gods*, our choice in living is reduced to sin or alienation. King Vidor chronicled the possibility. Robert Altman shows us the end result. In Altman's terms, American democracy has committed suicide. It has been painless and it has been a choice—or rather the culmination of many choices that individually appeared harmless. "The game of life is hard to play. I'm gonna lose it anyway. The losing card I'll someday lay, so this is all I have to say. Suicide is painless."[7] Both believe that America is more and that Americans can change. For both of them, the key is overcoming passivity and accepting citizenship. Americans will remain open selves, but need to avoid the excesses of that self's personality—too much conformity, loss of concern for one another, too great a reliance on fact and technique, too much adoration of the self, and too great a concern for material prosperity. Twentieth century America may have engaged in a flirtation with suicide, but twenty-first century America can change its mind.

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Endnotes

[1]Auteur directors are characterized by distinctive personal and creative styles and voices and seek to keep creative control of projects in their own hands.

[2]This description of the Myth of America fits well the description of the American political character found in Inkeles, 1979; Potter, 1970; and Lipset, 1963 and 2004.

[3]King Vidor films consulted in this research include: *The Big Parade* (1925), *The Crowd* (1928), *Hallelujah!* (1929), *Our Daily Bread* (1934), *Stella Dallas* (1937), *An American Romance* (1944), *Duel in the Sun* (1946), and *The Fountainhead* (1949).

[4]Robert Altman films consulted in this research include: *M.A.S.H.* (1970), *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), *Nashville* (1975), *Streamers* (1983), *Secret Honor* (1984), *Tanner '88* (1988), *The Player* (1992), *Short Cuts* (1993), *Cookie's Fortune* (1999), *Dr. T and the Women* (2000), and *Tanner on Tanner* (2004).

[5]Altman talks about greed as the topic of his films often. See Sterritt, 2000, 157, 176, 181, 184-86.

[6]This is most obvious in *The Player, Nashville, Secret Honor, Streamers,* and *Short Cuts*.

[7]Mike Altman and Johnny Mandel. *The MASH Theme Song*. Copyright (C) 1970 by Twentieth Century-Fox Music Corporation, 8544 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90069, Twentieth Century-Fox Music Corp. Ltd., London W1, England.

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