

Sturges – Altman – America

By juxtaposing the major works of **Preston Sturges** and **Robert Altman** in February and March 2012, the Austrian Film Museum not only pays tribute to two major satirists of the 20th century, but also invites its audiences to “re-read” America – at the start of a U.S. election year which may well turn into an endless stream of Manichaeian confrontations: between "good" and "evil," government and the private sector, "individualism" and "socialism."

Instead, this double series attempts to present a polyphony of voices and a more complex social and mental topography of America: **Sturges and Altman are related not just by some of their artistic methods, they are also great, multi-faceted portraitists of the American character, oscillating between scornful laughter, sympathy and sadness.** Their stories of bent and broken lives create the image of a people who will never quite come to their senses, for that would mean giving up their most treasured plans and aspirations – both as individuals and as a nation.

The selection of works centers on those uncanny "runs" which defined both filmmakers' careers and which are each tied to a particular moment in American (film) history: the unbroken chain of seven comedies directed by Preston Sturges between 1940 and 1944 and the ten-part panorama of American society made by Altman from 1970 to 1977 (from *MASH* to *3 Women*) are among the richest and most compact bodies of work in all Hollywood cinema. Six additional Altman films from the years 1982-2006 have also been chosen for this programme; they retain a strong relationship to his 1970s work and represent the later phases of his career.

Preston Sturges

Seven Films. 1940–44

Very few U.S. films are as decidedly American as the comedies of Preston Sturges. Their temperament is American (pace and sweeping ideas are more important to them than tact and tastefulness). Their dialogue is American, as pointed and playful in the use of national idioms as the travel writings of Mark Twain. And even the director's career was “American”, in its sudden rise and quick descent, much like the lives of the everymen who stumble through films like ***Christmas in July*** (1940) and ***Hail the Conquering Hero*** (1944).

Preston Sturges (1898-1959) – screenwriter, part-time inventor and would-be entrepreneur – was past forty when he staked his claim as a complete *auteur*. ***The Great McGinty*** (1940), a lesson on the benefits of corruption, was a surprise success and showed Sturges' **idiosyncratic blend of biting satire and rowdy slapstick**. It was the **first in an amazing series**: within four years, Sturges delivered one shimmering, multi-layered comedy after another, before he fell out of favor with audiences and the studios.

Sturges consistently worked with established genre tropes and character types. With ***The Lady Eve*** (1941), he set an elegantly high mark for the **screwball comedy** cycle, and then brought the form to rousing absurdity with ***The Palm Beach Story*** (1942). At the same time, his movies cast

an **unabashedly direct look at daily life in the U.S.** with its enormous promises of happiness alongside extremely rigid constraints. The films deal with low-ranking employees hoping to hit the jackpot (*Christmas in July*), mass poverty and dislocation (*Sullivan's Travels*, 1941), and the hysteria of home front patriotism during World War II (*Hail the Conquering Hero*). In 1944, casting scorn at any considerations of censorship, even the plight of a teenage girl impregnated by a stranger (who is also a soldier) became the starting point for dizzyingly comic confusion: "*The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* is like taking a nun on a roller coaster," noted critic James Agee, delighted with this pinnacle of Sturgesian audacity.

The transition **from screenwriter to director of his own material**, which Sturges tenaciously fought for, set a precedent in the early 1940s for other studio writers like Billy Wilder and John Huston. But even though Sturges wrote nearly all of his films alone, they owe their unmistakable signature to a group: a cast of **two dozen gifted character actors** who form a *basso continuo* from film to film, and who often push the nominal "leads" to the side. Just as John Ford returned to Monument Valley again and again, Sturges repeatedly revels in the facial landscapes of his regular acting troupe – the fury-furrowed forehead of William Demarest, the jowls of Franklin Pangborn, the turtle-neck of Jimmy Conlin. With this lineup of talent, Sturges also reached back towards tradition: many of his regulars were trained in the elastic ensemble acting style of 1930s cinema, which he elevated to a higher level. Some of his actors had already worked in the silent era, and Sturges placed their exuberant talent for slapstick on equal footing with wit and sophistication.

The movements of his minor characters and their verbal exchanges are decisive features of the Sturges style: **chaotic and brilliantly orchestrated** at the same time, these images and sounds serve as allegories of his restless energy as a filmmaker. With abrupt changes of cadence and so flexible in satiric thrust that they can never be nailed down to a fixed point of view, his films are already polyphonic in their conception. Nowhere is this more evident than in *Sullivan's Travels*, a tragicomedy about a Hollywood director who sets out to learn what it's like to be poor. The conciliatory ending cannot erase the memory of how each of the film's episodes had torn itself away from the preceding one. Which is another "typically American" facet of Sturges' films: Hollywood inside jokes and harrowing social critique are often separated only by a cut.

The films series will be complemented by a lecture on Preston Sturges and American Society by the film critic and scholar, Joachim Schätz, on February 23.

February 10 to March 7, 2012

Robert Altman

Sixteen Films. 1970–2006

At the end of *Nashville* (1975) and the beginning of *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976), the Stars and Stripes billow in the wind. The flag is an emblem: a symbol of the dream that America dreams of itself, which it perverts and destroys and refuses to stop dreaming – in the form of a sprawling extravaganza of entertainment, politics and business (that is, capitalism plus democracy plus pathos plus advertising) which have become one. Altman, the polemicist: "Since 9/11, when I see

an American flag flying, it's a joke." His cinema tirelessly scours the continent of dreams, lies and myths – free of illusion, incorruptible, satirical, comic-tragic. And always with boundless curiosity and paradoxical pleasure: to bathe in a tub of wrath and lust full of contaminated water that will immediately be gleefully poured on the ground of truth. *A Long Goodbye* à la Altman.

Born in 1925 in Kansas City, Robert Altman flew bombers in World War II, started a dog tattooing business (as rumor has it), wrote stories, plays and scripts, worked in television for a long time and directed his first film in 1955. His meteoric rise to chief anthropologist of the United States began 15 years later with *MASH*, that cynical farce praised by Pauline Kael as "the best American war comedy since sound came in" and the "sanest American movie of recent years." This coincided with the development of two fertile breeding grounds: the **transitional period known as "New Hollywood,"** after the old studio bosses had retreated and before the new commercial standards of blockbuster cinema arrived; and secondly, under the sign of Vietnam and Watergate, the first **era of American insecurity.** For a while, Hollywood offered a kind of creative space for new talents, themes and narrative forms, while the disaster of American politics caused the faltering of ideological certainties that had been firmly established over generations.

Alongside Scorsese, Altman was the great realist and innovator of this era, and a profound and adventurous chronicler of the American malaise. Between 1970 and 1977, he worked with classic film genres, which he slaughtered, bent, and deformed: the war movie (*MASH*), gangster film (*Thieves Like Us*), film noir (*The Long Goodbye*), gambling film (*California Split*), fantasy (*Brewster McCloud*), political and musical film (*Nashville*), melodrama (*3 Women*) – and the Western, the epitome of all American genres: in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, capitalism arrives at the American West and showbiz takes over the role of history teacher – by reciting lies in the manner of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show (from which, in return, the Hollywood Western would soon be born).

Altman's America is built upon hysteria, neurosis, deceit and glamour. A realm in which individuals have become sick, lonely, crazy, unconscious in thought, impotent, even when they are considered "powerful." This is similarly true for the Hollywood studio executive in *The Player* or the presidential candidate in *Tanner '88* – they are prisoners of the system, invalids of the perverted dream. Such disintegration corresponds to the *multi character form* which Altman admirably promoted in film after film, that of a **fragmented, vibrant, anxious and panoramic narrative:** the fixed plot is replaced by **improvisation**, the protagonist by a **chorus**, the dialogue by a **buzz** of voices and sounds, the static image by a **network** of zooms and flowing camera moves.

"Enter chaos": Ever since *Nashville*, the only appropriate term for polyphonic, multi-layered realism might be "Altmanesque." In very specific ways, Altman demonstrated how dizzyingly diverse, conspicuously contradictory, in short: how chaotic our so-called reality can be. Although he was known as a grand master of social dissection, Altman's strength is not so much in the field of analysis but in his revelatory amplification **of the "atmospheric" – a rapturous yet sinister and precise type of observation.** The fact that he observes what he has previously staged is part of his paradoxical genius. Altman rolls up his sleeves and makes everyday chaos look easy, fun and overwhelmingly documentary-like.

February 10 to March 7, 2012

In person:

Michael Snow

Michael Snow, born in Toronto in 1929, is one of the most influential artists of the past half-century. Among his multiple disciplines – improvisational jazz, painting, sculpture, video installations, photography – film is the medium which secured his breakthrough at the end of 1960s and to which he owes his central position in contemporary art. Film curators and critics advanced Snow's work long before the art world recognized his importance. His "structuralist epics" (J. Hoberman) such as *Wavelength* (1967), *La Région centrale* (1971), *Rameau's Nephew* (1974) and *So Is This* (1982) are regarded as **milestones of a "cinema of thought" which puts the relationship between image and viewer at the center of the work.**

Many of Michael Snow's works are continually screened in the Film Museum's ongoing cycle *What is Film*. Therefore, the series ***In person: Michael Snow*** and the parallel exhibition at the Vienna Secession focus more on those aspects of his work that are lesser known in Austria. They also offer **the rare opportunity to experience Michael Snow in talks about his oeuvre.**

The four programs of the series deal with Snow's early work (including the animated ***A to Z*** from 1956 and ***New York Eye and Ear Control***, propelled by the music of Albert Ayler); with *Wavelength*, as a core moment of his work, leading to a witty remake of sorts, the 2003 ***WVLNT – Wavelength For Those Who Don't Have the Time***; with his feature-length exploration of the digital medium (****Corpus Callosum***, 2002); and with two other major works made right after *Wavelength*: ↔ (*Back and Forth*) and *One Second in Montreal* (both 1969).

Michael Snow will be present for introductions and Q&As at all screenings. The event is held in cooperation with the Vienna Secession: The Secession exhibition "***Michael Snow. Recent Works***" (February 23 to April 15, 2012) presents both new installations and photographic works.

February 24 to 27, 2012

Premiere:

"Raavanan" by Mani Ratnam

54 year-old **Mani Ratnam** holds a special place among Indian filmmakers. **Coming from Southern India (Tamil Nadu)**, he first made his mark with ambitious productions in the Tamil language, which dealt with **social issues using spectacular technique**. Ratnam's *Nayakan* (1987) was named by *Time Magazine* as one of the "100 Greatest Films of All Time," and with Ratnam's discovery of (now two-time Oscar winning) composer AR Rahman, he was also an innovator in the field of film music. Ratnam's Tamil successes finally enabled him to cross over to "Bollywood." *Dil Se* (1998), Ratnam's first Hindi film, was controversial in India but widely celebrated in the west – and is now regarded as a classic of modern Indian cinema.

Similar to *Dil Se*, **Ratnam's latest project, Raavanan (2010)**, is fast-paced, filled with grandiose set pieces and, at the same time, acutely aware of India's political reality. It is also an unusual re-

reading of the Indian national epic, *Ramayana*: "Ravana," the ten-headed demon and antagonist of the epic here becomes the outlaw and social bandit Veera (Vikram Kennedy). The kidnapping of Ragini (Aishwarya Rai in the role of "Sita") is what triggers the plot, because Ragini is the wife of Veera's nemesis, the brutal cop Dev (an equivalent to the heroic-divine "Rama" figure in the epic).

Ratnam was able to realize this endeavor in two versions, filmed at the same time: as a Hindi film called *Raavan* (in this case the actor Vikram Kennedy switches sides and plays the cop) and as the Tamil version, ***Raavanan***. Indian critics and film websites have since vehemently debated the merits and specifics of both versions, usually giving preference to *Raavanan*. When he received the *Glory to the Filmmaker! Award* at the Venice Film Festival, Mani Ratnam chose *Raavanan* as the film to be shown after the ceremony.

March 1 and 2, 2012

For more information and photos, please visit www.filmmuseum.at or contact:
Sabine Maierhofer, s.maierhofer@filmmuseum.at, phone 43-1-533 70 54 ext 19 or:
Alessandra Thiele, a.thiele@filmmuseum.at, phone 43-1-533 70 54 ext 19