

## 24-Track Narrative? Robert Altman's *Nashville*

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Article abstract

An analysis of the sound track of Robert Altman's *Nashville* shows that the filmmaker goes beyond the conventions of traditional sound recording in his use of the twenty-four tracks for twenty-four separate characters. As a result the film initially appears innovative since a traditional technology is transformed into a new one with the result that the simple linear approach opens up into three dimensions. But this non-hierarchic openness oriented to spectator choice yields in the end to the narrative logic of the traditional linear model.



*Nashville* de Robert Altman (1975)  
Coll. Cinémathèque québécoise

# 24-Track Narrative? Robert Altman's *Nashville*

Rick Altman

## RÉSUMÉ

Le film *Nashville* de Robert Altman est ici analysé du point de vue de la bande sonore. L'article démontre que le cinéaste, dépassant les conventions de l'enregistrement sonore, associe les 24 pistes à 24 personnages indépendants. L'œuvre se présente de prime abord novatrice, utilisant une technologie traditionnelle transformée en nouvelle technologie qui ouvre à la tridimensionalité au lieu de la linéarité. Mais de non hiérarchique, ouverte et orientée vers le choix des spectateurs, l'œuvre subordonne finalement sa technologie sonore aux impératifs de la narration et se termine selon le modèle linéaire traditionnel.

## ABSTRACT

An analysis of the sound track of Robert Altman's *Nashville* shows that the filmmaker goes beyond the conventions of traditional sound recording in his use of the twenty-four tracks for twenty-four separate characters. As a result the film initially appears innovative since a traditional technology is transformed into a new one with the result that the simple linear approach opens up into three dimensions. But this non-hierarchical openness oriented to spectator choice yields in the end to the narrative logic of the traditional linear model.

«The heart of the system is a Stevens Electronics 1-inch 8 Track Recorder....

Mr. Altman owns three...»

James E. Webb Jr., chief sound recorder for *Nashville*

From Lang's *Dr. Mabuse der Spieler* to Fellini's *Otto e mezzo* and Truffaut's *La Nuit américaine*, cinema directors have often represented the process of filmmaking as the process of choosing images, usually carried out by a director-like figure characterized by his ability to determine which images will be created and how they will be combined. Sometimes identified as one of the basic aspects of modernism, this tendency changes key in some of the most important American films of the seventies. Whereas the process of filmmaking had previously always been represented by image-oriented personnel, the new metaphor for filmmaking is to be found in the technique of collecting and mixing sound. Unlike the private *eye* of earlier detective films, for example, the protagonist of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) is a private *ear*, a sound technician who re-creates the world around him through an extraordinary ability to overhear private conversations.

Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975) carries the metaphor a step further. Modeling his narrative on the 24-track recording technology commonly used within the music industry, Altman builds his story around 24 independent characters. Like so many individual sound tracks, separately collected and routed to a common mixing board, the characters never all appear in the same scene until their common appearance at the concluding Parthenon political rally and concert, where the final mix-down can finally be effected. Altman's metaphor for cinema creation is thus based neither in film direction nor in cinematography, but on the process of mixing sound. Created as an ode to country music for the American bicentennial, *Nashville* is also a tribute to the twenty-four track sound technology that dominates the music industry.

### Giving Credit

Behind the opening credits of *Nashville* we witness the recording of a staunchly patriotic song: "We must be doin' somethin' right to last two hundred years." As the Panavision camera slowly pans across the recording studio, we see the musicians inside individual glass-enclosed booths: the lead singer Haven Hamilton, the quartet of back-up singers, the seven instrumentalists, and the sound engineers seated at a mixing console. As the song reaches its final notes, a telephoto shot shows Hamilton in medium close-up in the lower right of the screen, with the back-up singers in medium shot on the upper left. The sound credits then appear in the lower lefthand corner:

**sound**

jim webb

chris mclaughlin

**sound system**

lion's gate 8 track sound

Curiously, the sound track has up until this point been restricted to the final mixed version of the song being recorded. Though the various groups are isolated from each other by windowed partitions, the separate sounds that they produce are never heard separately. Though the camera moves from performer to performer, never simultaneously displaying all twelve musicians, the sound track constantly features the sounds created by all twelve performers. Yet what we hear is not exactly what the musicians have created. Each singer and instrumentalist has been amplified, equalized, and mixed into the final synthetic version assembled by the recording engineers. What we hear is thus a fiction — a smooth, carefully hierarchized harmony created in the process of mixing.

As the sound credits disappear, we cut to a shot of the people in the control room, including the recording engineers, Haven Hamilton's wife Pearl, his son Buddy, diverse onlookers, and a woman who has just entered. Now, for the first time, we hear the sounds coming from the recording booth, mixed with the lead singer's queries. The following dialogue ensues:

*[Cut to medium long shot of recording booth, with Buddy and Pearl seated in the foreground.]*

PEARL, *pointing to newcomer.* — That girl right down there on the end...

HAVEN, *interrupting her.* — Hold it, hold it everybody.

Recording supervisor (Bob). — Hold it everybody.

Pearl, *to Buddy.* — ... you gotta get her out.

*[Cut to medium long shot of Haven, with banjo player in foreground and back-up singers in background.]*

HAVEN. — Bob.

BOB. — Yes sir.

HAVEN. — Bob, I want to talk to Buddy.

*[Cut to medium two-shot of Buddy and Pearl, with slight pan left as Buddy turns.]*

HAVEN. — Buddy.

BUDDY, *turning back to speak into the mixing board mike.* — Yes sir, Dad.

*[Cut to medium long shot of Haven, as before.]*

HAVEN. — Buddy, who is that woman in there with the hat on?

*[Cut to medium long shot of recording booth, as before.]*

HAVEN. — Is she a friend of yours?

BUDDY. — I don't know, Dad. She's...

OPAL, *looking straight at Haven, and speaking at the same time as Buddy.* — I'm Opal. Mr. Hamilton, I'm Opal.

HAVEN, *while Opal is speaking.* — Bob, Bob, Buddy, both of you.

OPAL, *continuing to speak over Haven.* — I'm from the BBC and I'm doing a documentary on Nashville.

HAVEN, *continuing to speak over Opal.* — You know I don't allow no people visiting...

OPAL, *to Pearl while Haven is speaking.* — Can he hear me?

HAVEN. — ... when I'm recording.

PEARL, *while Haven is speaking.* — Yes, he heard you, baby.

HAVEN. — I want no recording equipment in that studio.

PEARL. — Buddy, go on, escort the lady out.

BUDDY, *turning back toward the mixing board mike.* — Yes sir.

*[Cut to medium long shot of Haven, as before.]*

OPAL. — Oh, I'm sorry Mr. Hamilton. I'm dreadfully sorry. Can I...? Do you want me to...?

HAVEN, *while Opal is speaking.* — If she wants a copy of this record, she can buy it when it's released. Would you ask her to leave, please.

*[Cut to medium long shot of recording booth, as before, but with Buddy now standing.]*

HAVEN. — These sessions are very expensive.

PEARL, *while Haven is speaking.* — All right, just take no... I'm sorry, just no strangers at all.

HAVEN. — She's breaking my concentration.

OPAL, *while Haven is speaking*. — Mr. Hamilton, I'll be waiting outside for you.

PEARL. — That's good.

OPAL. — We'll have a little interview.

PEARL. — Yeah, fine.

HAVEN. — All right, Bob, I...

*[Cut to medium close-up of Haven, as with sound credits earlier.]*

HAVEN. — ... want to do another one. Jimmy, you count off. I want to hear a little more Haven in this one.

Whereas the song was heard only in a carefully hierarchized version, the two minutes of conversation among Haven, Pearl, Opal, Buddy, and Bob are a free-for-all of overlapping dialogue, simultaneous speech, and undisciplined babble. As Haven's final comment reminds us, the difference between the two modes has nothing to do with the disparity between song and speech. Instead, it is the recording console and the recording engineers that make the difference. When the sound we hear is routed through the mixing board, we can be sure of a harmonious, fully comprehensible mix; unmediated, however, the sound is raucous and hard to follow.

From the very beginning of *Nashville*, audience attention is attracted to the constitution of the sound track. Which sounds do we hear? What are their characteristics? Who chooses them? The recording sequence just quoted foregrounds questions of sound in two totally separate ways. Not only does it contrast different ways of mixing sound, but it also shows us the equipment and the personnel responsible for combining multiple separate sound channels into a single coherent mix. The continuation of the credit sequence further alerts us to sound's central position in *Nashville*.

*[Cut to large close-up of fourteen VU meters, with their needles jumping in time to the music heard throughout this scene.]*

*[Cut to medium close-up/plan américain deep space shot of second recording studio, with recording engineers in near right foreground, Buddy and Opal entering through door in left background.]*

BUDDY, *opening door into second studio*. — Ah, there we are.

*[The following credits appear at this point on the righthand side of the screen, covering the bodies of the recording engineers:]*

*re-recording mixer*  
*richard portman*

*sound editor*  
*william a. sawyer*

*assistant*  
*randy kelley*

*music recorded by*  
*gene eichelberger*  
*and johnny rosen]*

BUDDY. — This is studio B right here, and I think they're doing some gospel...

OPAL. — Oh, how sweet!

BUDDY. — ... recording of some sort. Hey, Glenn. How are you?

GLENN. — Fine.

*[Secondary sound credits disappear and are replaced by other credits.]*

BUDDY. — You don't mind if we sit in just a little bit, do you?

GLENN. — Come on in.

BUDDY. — Okay.

OPAL. — It's so little.

*[As camera pans right to follow Buddy and Opal, it reveals first the entire mixing board and then the glass enclosed studio with green-robed singers.]*

BUDDY. — Why don't we go on down front here, so we get out of their way, okay?

FEMALE SINGER, *while Buddy is talking.* — Do you believe in Jesus?

OPAL. — It's so pretty!

CHORUS, *while Buddy and Opal are talking.* — Yes I do, yes I do.

OPAL. — You know, I've been to all the...

BUDDY. — Careful!



FEMALE SINGER, *while Buddy and Opal are talking.* — Do you believe in Jesus?

*[Sound continues throughout scene]*

OPAL. — ... recording studios in London and they're always enormous...

BUDDY. — Yeah.

OPAL. — ... and very sort of impersonal.

Recording engineers:

*[largely incomprehensible dialogue starts here and continues throughout scene].*

BUDDY. — We'll have to sort of...

OPAL. — It's so cozy.

BUDDY. — ... keep down a little bit so they can...

OPAL. — Oh, it's... I think I..

BUDDY. — ... so they can see what's going on. There we are.

Throughout this scene, the key role of the sound engineers is stressed. The opening shot of the VU meters, the music recording credits displayed on the back of those actually doing the music recording, the slow pan across the recording console — every aspect of this scene seems designed to reinforce the previous scene's emphasis on the mixers and their contribution to the overall artistic product. When the sound is properly mixed, we get music; without proper mixing, cacophony results.

As the scene continues, however, with Opal's tales of missionary exploits in Africa competing with the mixers' discussions and the gospel music coming from the studio, we realize that we are hearing a totally different sound mix from the one heard in the previous studio. Whereas the rendition of "Two Hundred Years" was devoid of ambient sound or extraneous conversations, "Do You Believe in Jesus?" is accompanied by a variety of other sounds. What's more, its volume level changes multiple times over the course of the scene. Even more striking is the effect of one of the recording engineers' request for "a little more Linnea" (meaning that he wants to raise the relative level of the lead singer, just as Haven wanted his level raised at the end of the previous scene). Instead of *hearing* "more Linnea" in the continuation of the scene, we cut from the medium shot of the control room to a full shot of the recording stage and immediately begin zooming in to a close-up of Linnea. In spite of the request for "a

little more Linnea", in this shot Linnea disappears from the sound track entirely.

As important as they are, this scene implies, the sound mixers in the story are subject to a higher authority, a mixer of mixers who has control over both sound and image, an ultimate instance whose power cannot be denied, but whose power is nevertheless exercised precisely according to the model provided by the recording engineers in these two scenes.

We come away from the opening credits with a number of conclusions about the sounds of *Nashville*:

1) Studied variation in the presentation of sound draws attention to the source, quality, and mediation of that sound.

2) Two main approaches to sound compete within the film: the hierarchized mode of carefully mixed music, and the cacophonous mode of competing dialogue.

3) Just as the sound mixer emerges as the key to the style of recorded music, so the film's overall form appears predicated on a mixer-like figure who reigns over image and sound alike.

Telling the story of twenty-four separate characters, *Nashville* is one of the most complex films of the seventies. Constantly focusing on the multiplicity of characters followed, critics have failed to attach any significance to the exact number of characters manipulated by Altman. For *twenty-four* is precisely the number of tracks used in the most complex versions of the recording technology introduced by Altman in *California Split* and used throughout *Nashville*. To direct, the credit sequence implies, is to manipulate a twenty-four track cast just as a sound engineer reduces twenty-four inputs to a small number of outputs. *Nashville* is not only about the city of sound, the capital of country music; it is also about film sound itself. Furthermore, the process of mixing sound serves as Altman's guiding metaphor for the process of creation itself. Reality is a twenty-four track affair. It remains to be seen how those twenty-four tracks will be mixed by the master engineer.

### **Multi-channel Technology**

Long known for his innovative approach to sound, Robert Altman showed a penchant for overlapping dialogue from the very start of his film-directing career. As early as *Countdown* (1968), Altman directed his actors to flout established Hollywood practice by interrupting each other regularly as they spoke. For this variation from tradition, Altman was fired from the production after completing principal photography. Finally enjoying commercial success with *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), Altman

continued his commitment to new sound strategies, notably in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971).

Besides the characteristic tendency toward overlapping dialogue, Altman's sound tracks regularly depend on improvised dialogue (along with the resultant variations in sound clarity), the more or less obtrusive use of secondary dialogue and sound effects (whether on — or off-screen), heavy dependence on mediated sound sources (radio, television, record and tape players, announcers speaking on public address systems), and a general tendency toward the simultaneous use of multiple independent sound sources. While the "layered" approach to sound used by Altman in the late sixties and early seventies produces a felling of reality rarely achieved by traditional techniques, it proved unacceptably costly in time and money.

In particular, Altman's insistence on composite sound tracks created problems for sound and image editors alike. In the Hollywood tradition, where each character's speech remains separate, the process of editing is relatively straightforward. With overlapping dialogue, the principle of discrete segments is violated and the editor's job becomes increasingly complex. Further complications are caused by Altman's practice of recording secondary dialogue and sound effects live, simultaneously with principal dialogue. While it is possible, with traditional recording techniques, to achieve some isolation between sound sources on separate recording channels, there is a limit to the separation available from standard microphones.

In the early seventies, Altman and his crew set out to solve this problem. Seeking an arrangement that would facilitate recording of improvised dialogue and the realistic reproduction of overlapping dialogue, simultaneous secondary conversations, and a broad spectrum of sound effects, Altman also insisted on a technology that would reduce the need for retakes and simplify some of the editing problems caused by the uneasy marriage of single-channel technology with a multi-channel approach to sound phenomena. The solution was found in the music industry. Whereas traditional film technique calls for a single boom-mounted microphone, hardwired to a single-channel recorder, music recording typically involves a separate mike for each performer or section of an orchestra. Fed into an 8-track recorder, the various musical inputs may then be individually modified and mixed as desired. Beginning with *California Split*, this is precisely the approach used by Altman. Under the direction of James E. Webb Jr., in charge of sound recording for all Altman films from 1974-1978, a concerted effort was made to perfect a sound

system based on maximum isolation between sound sources and maximum ability to manipulate and combine separate inputs.

In order to assure versatility and source separation, the Altman system makes use of radio microphones, with a separate mike for each character and sound effect source. Since each mike picks up only one character, neither improvisation on the set nor overlapping dialogue nor even simultaneous conversations present a real problem, for each track can be separately adjusted in terms of volume, reverb, equalization, and other factors. In the terminology of Altman's sound crew, this approach "unmixes" the sound. For *California Split*, *Nashville*, *Buffalo Bill*, *Three Women*, and *A Wedding*, Jim Webb made regular use of a Sony ECM-50 electret lavalier microphone, along with an English-made Artech radio-link, while on *A Perfect Couple*, *Health*, and *Popeye*, Bob Gravenor used an even smaller mini-mike made by Ivan Kruglak of Coherent Communications, along with English-made Micron transmitters. Doing away with the traditional microphone boom and its ever-present shadow, this approach frees the set from familiar quarrels between sound personnel (intent on securing the best possible placement for the microphone) and image personnel (equally intent on excluding boom shadows from the image).

Recording is done on a Stevens Electronics one-inch 8-track recorder running at 15 inches per second off AC or a 12-volt DC battery. Seven tracks are used for seven separate inputs, while the eighth is used for synchronization purposes. Webb's original mixing panel included two eight-input, four-output consoles, mounted together on a single coffee-table-size cart. In late 1976 it was replaced by a more sophisticated, specially designed console including dialogue-oriented equalization and a number of other special features. For particularly complex scenes and music (typically recorded live for Altman's films), the two units were combined, for a total of sixteen or twenty-four tracks.

Once recording is completed, all usable tracks are transferred to 3-stripe 35mm magnetic film. They are then edited on one of Altman's two specially converted K.E.M. 8-plate editing tables, equipped with nine separate pre-amplifiers, each with its own volume control. This permits the 8-plate simultaneously to handle three separate 3-track sound sources. Similarly modified projectors facilitate screenings. After preliminary decisions have been made about the sound mix, each source track to be used is retransferred to single-stripe 35mm magnetic film for final mixing.

The end result is a complex sound track unlike anything produced prior to Altman's collaboration with Webb at his own Lion's Gate Film facilities. Increasingly refined over nearly a decade by Altman and his crews, this system has since been imitated by many others, to the point where Altman's "radio" approach is now seen throughout the film industry as an accepted alternative to the traditional "perspective" system, as it is now termed. In the words of Alan Rudolph (assistant director of *California Split* and *Nashville*), Altman's sound men Jim Webb and Chris McLaughlin are "like astronauts as far as the sound world is concerned."

### **The layered approach**

The traditional Hollywood approach to sound mixing is consistently hierarchical in nature. All sounds are implicitly evaluated according to their ability to contribute to the film's various aspects. The highest rank among diegetic sounds is accorded to sounds that contribute to the elaboration of narrative (primarily narrative-oriented sound effects and the principal characters' dialogue), while attention to characterization and style is evaluated somewhat less highly. Sounds that serve primarily to enhance realism (incomprehensible dialogue, atmospheric sound effects) are considered to have the least importance of all diegetic sounds. Careful attention to sound quality is warranted only when particular aural details contribute directly to narrative concerns (as when a long delay time permits us to locate the speaker in a hard-walled enclosed space like a cave, or when muffled sound identifies the speaker as hidden beneath layers of material). The value of music varies according to its use; the closer it is connected to the narrative (such as when it is used to heighten suspense), the greater its importance.

Based on this narrative-oriented hierarchy, classical Hollywood cinema produces sound of an intermittent nature. While the combined volume of music, sound effects, and dialogue stays fairly uniform throughout (with a tendency toward expanded volume range only during the credits and narrative climaxes), each separate sound component is carefully engineered to carry out its own mission while avoiding interference with sound functions deemed more important.

Even though the sum of all sounds stays very nearly constant, each of the separate sound components looks like a line drawing of Monument Valley. The music, which begins on a high plateau initiated by theme music accompanying the credits, dips to the valley floor each time an element of narrative importance appears. Sound effects remain subordinate until they take on a

narrative function causing them to peak, after which they return to their familiar subalternate level. Dialogue occurs irregularly, typically usurping all available volume when it does. Within any given dialogue passage the same alternating strategy obtains, with each speaker studiously keeping silent while another is speaking. Each component appears on an intermittent basis, thanks to the careful collaboration of sound recorders and mixers on the one hand and specially designed sound technology on the other. Paralleling the image developments that assure a clear visual focus on narratively important objects and characters, sound technique and technology evolved together for a quarter century toward easier and more effective use of this intermittent approach to sound.

No separate sound source is actually treated independently. Sound levels depend not only on the individual sound source, but also on its position relative to the other sound sources. Rapid experimental proof of this fact may be obtained by displacing the graph of any individual sound source: thanks to the matching (but inverted) configurations of the various volume patterns, we can easily restore the misplaced graph to its proper position.

Altman's approach to sound commonly lies in direct opposition to the intermittent system. Whereas perspective miking, accompanied by intermittent mixing, typically serves as an omniscient guide to a stable narrative-oriented hierarchy, Altman's radio-miked inputs are often mixed in a non-hierarchical fashion, producing sound tracks that are complex, thick, multi-layered. Whereas the separate sound sources of a traditional Hollywood sound track all fit together according to a clear interlocking pattern, with only one possible fit, Altman refuses to accommodate one sound source to another. Far from reducing ambient sound to assure comprehension of dialogue, Altman often begins a second dialogue while the first continues, with both mixed at the same volume. While both dialogues proceed, Altman's sound men often retain and amplify the very "wild" sounds that other sound crews work so hard to eliminate. Rather than use a high pass filter to remove set noise and background sound, for example, Bob Gravenor reports that he purposely retains stray sounds and background noises in order to avoid "thin" sound quality. In the intermittent tradition, separate sound source volume graphs fit together in only one necessary manner; indeed, it is this manipulation of volume that constitutes one of the principal marks of narration within the classical Hollywood tradition. In Altman's films, on the other hand, volume graphs could fit together in a wide variety of manners; here the process

of narration is revealed by other aspects than that of relative volume.

Instead of forcing all auditors into the same experience of the film, Altman's layering of multiple sound sources opens up the sound track to a variety of divergent hearings. Multiple screenings of a film like *Nashville* are unlikely to be repeatedly perceived in the same way, even when they are experienced multiple times by the same person. In this sense, Altman's techniques might be seen as fulfilling for the sound track the dream of a more democratic film art that Bazin associated with Welles and deep-focus cinematography. In the many scenes where multiple sound sources are simultaneously present in the final sound mix it is virtually impossible to hear everything at once. Yet, in many cases, each individual sound source is perfectly understandable. In the credit sequence quoted above, the auditor intrigued by Geraldine Chaplin's BBC reporter character will easily comprehend every bit of her dialogue, while the faithful *Laugh-In* viewer will have no trouble following Henry Gibson's rendition of the country singer Haven Hamilton. While the image editing typically dictates the *viewer's* attention pattern, the multiple available tracks in the sound mix offer the *auditor* diverse possible listening patterns. Usually mixed at levels permitting comprehension of individual tracks in spite of the continued presence of multiple sound sources, Altman's sound mix thus replaces Hollywood's familiar intermittent sound editing patterns by alternation of attention on the part of the auditor.

It is instructive to compare Altman's characteristic sound mix to the approach taken by European and American television network news programs to foreign-language interviews. In both traditions, when a news anchorperson presents an interview of a foreign dignitary, the sound mix usually at first concentrates on the foreigner's speech. Only a second or two into the interview, however, the original language is overdubbed with a voice-over translation. In the American sound mix this translation typically overwhelms the original version, to the point where the foreign language is nearly inaudible and totally incomprehensible. The European approach, however, leaves the original language at a fully comprehensible level, so that it remains possible to follow the original as well as the voice-over translation.

With the American system, the foreign language loses its independent existence. It remains audible at the beginning and end of the interview only to identify the language spoken and to guarantee the authenticity of the dignitary's speech. The translation interposes itself between the original language and the auditor, thus forcibly imposing its own representation of the interview.

Something quite different takes place in European news broadcasts. When a French reporter introduces an interview with Helmut Kohl, a new space for interpretation is opened up. Auditors may listen to the French voice-over, but if their German is adequate they may also decide to concentrate on the original. Gifted linguists may in fact note that the translation strays from the original. Because the European approach presents original and translated versions alike in a nearly equal sound mix, both auditors and the languages themselves take on a new power and a new responsibility. On the one side, the tyranny of a single official language; on the other, the linguistic openness engendered by European community.

Similar to the balanced sound mix practiced in television news throughout Europe, Altman's sound studiously avoids hierarchy, charging individual auditors rather than the sound mix with choosing the sound actually heard. The airport scene directly following the credits provides multiple examples of this approach. With Barbara Jean's return from the Baltimore Burn Center expected imminently, the Nashville airport becomes the center of frantic activity. The singer's fans have turned out to see her, as have the television crews anxious to report the event, the hangers-on curious to see what will happen, and the politicians intent on capitalizing on such a large gathering of voters. In all, twenty-three of the film's twenty-four featured characters are present. The scene's sound presents an apparently formless amalgam of an extraordinary array of sound sources. Besides generalized crowd noise and multiple independent conversations, we hear the television announcer both live and broadcast, the airport public address system, multiple types of music, the amplified voices of multiple major characters, the Hal Phillip Walker political campaign sound truck, passing airplanes, and many other independent sound sources — usually two, three, or four at a time.

From one point of view, the handling of the airport scene apparently typifies a documentary approach to a real event. Rarely can the documentary filmmaker get a fully continuous sound record of any particular phenomenon. Unable to keep a microphone at a constant distance from each principal character, sound crews on live events must take what they can get. Every aspect of Altman's sound track gives us the impression that precisely that has occurred. Some conversations are broken off in the middle, others are muddled; the TV reporter's narrative is alternately perfectly clear and submerged beneath layers of other sounds; the sound quality of the amplified speeches by the major



characters varies from intimate to boomy and echoing (as if they had been miked from different locations); dialogue is alternately isolated and clear or multiple and interfering; sometimes there is complete silence, while at other times (as when the American Airlines plane taxis past), the roar is deafening. Characteristic of location-collected live sound from unstaged events, these variations recall the sound practices of television news, thus reinforcing the notion that we are witnessing not a fiction film but a media report on a real event.

Altman's sound practice constantly involves the use of sound sources characterized by their amplification within the diegesis. In *Nashville* alone the list includes recording studios, public address systems, TV reporters, police sirens, and the Hal Phillip Walker sound truck, as well as multiple radios, televisions, tape recorders, miked announcers, and amplified singers. In fact, beginning with *California Split*, Altman's sound tracks are incessantly populated with multiple examples of recorded, amplified, or otherwise mediated sound, all deriving from sources lying beyond the characters' control. The function of this emphasis on mediated sound is not at first obvious, yet in the context provided by Altman's image technique it comes slowly into focus.

In order to create a space permitting multiple, overlapping dialogues, Altman early adopted the use of a broad-range zoom lens, permitting continuous focus from extreme long shot to large close-up. Commonly defining large spaces with one end of the zoom, often in repeated master shots from different angles, Altman then uses multiple dialogues and other off-screen sound sources to represent the continued presence of that large space — "Altman'scope", as it is termed by Henry Gibson. While sound continues to guarantee the presence of a broad expanse, the zoom lens closes in on a smaller part of the overall space. In a particularly symbiotic fashion, the amplex of the space justifies the multiplicity of sound sources, while the richness of the sound track testifies to the continued presence of the large space.

A similar logic applies to the use of mediated sound. By multiplying the number of mediated sound events, Altman increases both the film's aural density and the apparent scale of scenic space. In addition, this technique enhances the auditor's sense of having to make regular choices among competing sounds. Though it is no doubt true that Altman's shooting system (multiple cameras and radio mikes) has something in common with television's quasi-documentary approach to major live events like natural disasters, demonstrations, and football games, much of the documentary quality of Altman's films comes from the presence in the final sound mix of mediated sounds that are

not recorded live at all. The sound apparently emanating from the Hal Phillip Walker sound truck, for example, was actually recorded in a sound studio. While the lack of spatial signature immediately indicates to a trained ear that the sound truck's political message cannot possibly have been recorded on location, the truck's apparently random appearance lends the film an aura of aural realism like that provided by all the mediated sounds of Altman's extremely varied soundscape.

The early scenes of *Nashville* move from one aurally rich and spatially complex scene to another. From the overlapping dialogue of the sound studio we cut directly to the multimediated airport scene, from which we rapidly move to a freeway pile-up during which multiple separate conversations share the sound track with radio music, the Walker sound truck, and diverse sound effects. Later scenes include stage performances at the Grand Ole Opry, the Opry Belle, two different night clubs, and a political smoker; all intensify the sound experience by giving as much attention to backstage talk and audience interaction as to the apparently featured songs. From beginning to end, it would seem that Altman remains faithful to his thick, rich sound, constantly creating the complex crowd scenes and public needed to justify a layered sound track.

### **The parthenon paradox**

The final scene of *Nashville* appears to have been created as the crowning motivation for Altman's large scene/thick sound aesthetic. With all twenty-four major characters present, this scene provides every possible justification for the overlapping dialogue, competing conversations, and interrupting media that characterize the first two-and-a-quarter hours of the film. Here, in the final scene, we expect Altman's democratization of sound to reach its apotheosis. We now know all the principal characters; we have reasons to be interested in every one. Which ones will we follow as their sounds compete? More traditional masters of sound — Alfred Hitchcock, for example — would have had us wondering how the already designated protagonist would fulfill his/her destiny. With Altman, at this point in such an aurally rich film, we have the right to expect that we will be asked instead to make our own choices about who and what is important.

The sound technique throughout the film has led us to believe that Altman's 24-track technology puts the auditor in the mixer's chair. It is our responsibility to choose which part of the sound track we will listen to, our responsibility to decide where importance lies. In the elaborately symbolic sound scenario developed by Altman throughout *Nashville*, the previous scenes serve as a

simulacrum of sound collection, with all the separate sounds finally coming together in the concluding Parthenon gathering, ready for the final mix-down. Starting in different locations and in differing situations, the characters are one by one collected for the ultimate performance: twenty-four separate sound sources, twenty-four separate tracks ready to be blended in a final multi-layered mix.

The Parthenon meeting begins with overt promises of characteristic Altman layering. A television broadcast featuring Howard K. Smith proves to be coming from a portable television brought to the Parthenon grounds by picnickers — a typically Altmanesque method of providing competing chatter for live dialogue and location sound effects. Yet, surprisingly, the TV sound never has to compete with any other sound sources. Instead, all other diegetic sound is either left out or mixed in at extremely low levels, so that the TV news broadcast dominates throughout.

As soon as Howard K. Smith has finished his editorializing on Hal Phillip Walker's campaign, the primary position on the sound track is turned over to an apparently non-diegetic version of the song "Wonder What This Year Will Bring," which reaches nearly to its conclusion before a conversation between Delbert Reese and John Triplette provides any aural competition. Here again, we have cause to believe that we are returning to Altman's "thick" mix. Even though Reese and Triplette are in long shot, their dialogue is given close-up volume, producing a characteristic conflict between the song and the conversation. When heard separately, both are perfectly understandable, but when they are mixed at the same level the auditor is forced to choose between them. Yet this layered effect is held for only a few seconds, until the song is rapidly faded out in favor of the dialogue.

As Reese and Triplette reach the Parthenon podium, we witness the first of many surprising shots showing multiple groups conversing on the stage. In previous scenes, shots of stages have been accompanied by multiple conversations among performers, impresarios, and audience members. As we arrive at the Parthenon stage, the image clearly reveals that multiple conversations are underway, yet we hear only the dialogue between Reese and Triplette, followed by the argument between Barnett and Triplette. At one point Barnett says to Triplette: "What the hell are you hollerin' about in front of all these people, then, huh? You trying to embarrass me?" Responds Triplette: "I'm trying to be heard. I'm trying to be heard." From what we see, from what we are told, we conclude that the preparations for a

major political rally/concert are complex and noisy, yet the sound track isolates a single conversation, as if it were being miked with a highly directional shotgun microphone. Traditionally, this is the sound treatment used to highlight narratively essential events in a context where they might otherwise be missed. What a change from *Nashville's* earlier sound strategy, where events important to the story are purposely embedded in a complex sound mix.

When we cut to the funeral of Mr. Green's wife, we surprisingly leave behind all the sound from the apparently nearby Parthenon stage. Eschewing his common strategy of broadening space by consistent use of off-screen sound, Altman appears to be treating his characters as so many separate vignettes rather than as the simultaneously present tracks of a complex sound mix. When we cut back to the stage, Haven Hamilton and Barbara Jean sing "One I Love You." Throughout their rendition, we cut one-by-one to the principal characters arriving. Yet on the sound track we hear nothing but the featured song and a low rumble of crowd noise; only Kenny and Mr. Green are allowed a few words of dialogue — in spite of the fact that many shots reveal characters either talking or singing along.

The next song, Barbara Jean's rendition of "My Idaho Home", occasions further anomalies. Whereas the previous song had excluded from the sound track all characters except Haven Hamilton and Barbara Jean, it did provide them a place in the image. During "My Idaho Home", in contrast, tight low-angle close-ups of Barbara Jean regularly alternate with high-angle medium shots of an obviously upset Kenny, whom we observe unlocking his mysterious violin case. In addition, we see a big close-up of the American flag, apparently from Kenny's viewpoint. Are we to conclude that the sound track too is being heard from Kenny's point of audition, thus explaining why it includes only Barbara Jean's song?

The unexpected poverty of the sound mix, at the very point when all twenty-four tracks are available for the final scene, can clearly be attributed to narrative imperatives. Instead of becoming increasingly complex, as the size and complexity of the event suggest it should, the sound mix is impoverished by the need to give attention to the film's narrative development. Surprisingly, there are no conflicting sound events in the period of confusion following the shooting of Barbara Jean. Characters politely alternate on the sound track, assuring perfect intelligibility. Even when Albuquerque begins to sing, the mix is manipulated in such a way as to avoid interfering with the few re-

maining lines of important dialogue. While the audience is apparently singing the lyrics of "It Don't Worry Me", there is no synchronization between the movement of their lips and the tempo of the song. Nor is any spatial signature associated with the singalong; we hear nothing but a crystal-clear rendition, as if the song had been recorded in a studio, far from the bothersome acoustics of a large crowd in an open space.

When the camera finally isolates the BBC reporter, her impassioned question is fitted into a rest in Albuquerque's song. "Can you please tell me what happened?" she asks. This return to the traditional intermittent approach to sound mixing is especially shocking in this particular case. Throughout the film, the reporter has evaluated Nashville life from an outsider's position, consistently coming to mistaken conclusions about plot details and broader cultural concerns. In the final scene, it is thus hardly surprising for her to miss the shooting that mars Barbara Jean's return to the stage. Her question about "what happened?" simply confirms our sense that she understands nothing about America. This position is undermined, however, by the manner in which we learn that she has missed the shooting.

From the beginning of the film we have been trained to listen carefully, to recognize that reality is multiple, that only careful vigilance and intelligent choices will help us understand Nashville and its characters. From the very start, the BBC reporter has served as a countermodel, someone who shows us how not to choose (as when she leaves Bud Hamilton's tender rendition of his own song in order to force her unwanted attention on Elliott Gould). That the reporter should fail to listen to the right sound source is hardly surprising. That Altman should slap us in the face with her ignorance about the shooting is another affair entirely. It would have been easy to embed the reporter's question in a rich sound texture constituted by the crowd's multiple reactions. Instead, the reporter's question is isolated by the mixer, who thus repossesses the rights and responsibilities to which the film had thus far accustomed us. For in this final scene the auditor no longer plays the role of sound mixer, personally choosing the important parts of the available twenty-four tracks. Like the sound mixer in the credit sequence asking for "a little more Linnea," we have been overruled by a higher instance, someone who insists on making our choices for us. After innovating for well over two hours, Altman now returns at the crucial moment to standard Hollywood technique. The earlier layered soundscape is now reduced to a single line of sound, just as the promised 24-track narrative has unexpectedly been mixed down to the most traditional of linear narratives.

## Printed texts and linear models

Why does Altman resort to such traditional techniques at the very moment when the complicated mix offered by radio-miked twenty-four-track technology seems so obviously called for? In order to answer this question we must leave *Nashville* for a moment and consider Altman's place in a broader history. What is it that leads Altman to insist on multiple miking and a balanced sound mix that upsets all the familiar conventions of sound recording? Why is it that Altman's technique should so often evoke comparisons to Orson Welles and Jean-Luc Godard? What do these filmmakers have in common?

Perhaps more than any other single attribute, these three filmmakers share a disdain for the linear workings of the written language. Millennia of manuscript technology followed by centuries of printing have accustomed us to process information one bit at a time, thus inducing not only writers but also visual artists to conceive their artistry in terms of a single linear flow: first this, then that, then the other. In their devotion to deep-focus photography, Welles and others attempt to provide an alternative to this single-channel approach. Instead of always focusing attention on a single center, the shot can simultaneously offer multiple points of interest, thus freeing cinema from the implicit linear model of printed prose.

Concerned to solve the same problem, Godard uses a fundamentally similar yet novel approach. Taking advantage of the potentially multi-channel nature of the filmic image (which offers not only iconic, but also linguistic and graphic signifiers), Godard systematically creates a "stereo" effect by setting his narrative characters in front of or next to culturally significant linguistic signs. Like the viewer of complex deep-focus shots, Godard's viewer must regularly interpret multiple phenomena simultaneously, thus undermining the linearity introduced by narrative-based hierarchies.

Altman's multi-channel sound, along with a tendency toward a balanced sound mix, produces a similar situation. In literary texts, dialogue must be presented sequentially. Even when separate speeches are represented as simultaneous, readers process written dialogue in sequence (which is why written transcriptions of simultaneous dialogue — like that at the beginning of this article — are so unsatisfactory). No matter that scenes like *Madame Bovary's* "comices agricoles" sequence should have achieved a lasting reputation on the basis of an ability to portray multiple simultaneous sound sources; these scenes still must represent one line of dialogue after another. At no point does

the reader actually feel what it is like to have to choose between simultaneous sounds, nor are readers ever forced to try to read multiple conversations simultaneously. In spite of the cinema's ability to do what literature cannot, the history of cinema is poor indeed in balanced sound mixes, offering two or more simultaneously interesting sound sources. The difficulties inherent in the use of competing sound sources are effectively avoided by the intermittent strategy, dominant since the coming of sound in Europe as well as Hollywood.

In the face of cinema's apparent willingness to adhere to the printed word's single-channel aesthetic, Altman not only chose to use traditional technology in a new manner, but he also developed a new sound technology, specifically dedicated to a non-hierarchical multi-channel soundscape. The characteristic Altman approach to sound may thus be read as an overt attempt to break out of cinema's heretofore literary model, to fight the tendency to reduce sound to its meaning, to replace the single-channel linearity of written discourse by a three-dimensional multiplicity calling for a radically different level and type of spectator — and especially auditor — activity.

Interpreted in this manner, Altman is something of a hero, an intellectual explorer opening up new territory for the artists of tomorrow. Indeed, this is precisely the evaluation forwarded by such influential critics as Pauline Kael. Yet we have seen the intrepid explorer abandon the search nearly in sight of the quarry. Master of multi-dimensionality, Altman nevertheless reduces the culminating scenes of *Nashville* to the familiar clichés of intermittent editing. One source of this treason may be found in Altman's instructions to screenplay writer Joan Tewkesbury. Asking Tewkesbury to develop a script about Nashville, Altman set only one other requirement: the story must end with a death. Innovative and unusual, *Nashville* nevertheless cannot reach its conclusion without a bow to the narrative needs that have long characterized feature films.

As long as Altman and his sound crew are dealing with preliminaries, everything is possible: overlapping dialogue, competing conversations, interfering media, and other examples of radio-miked twenty-four-track multi-dimensionality. Once narrative necessity takes hold, however, innovative sound techniques go out the door. As long as the film's mix refuses to select and hierarchize, the sound retains its many complex attributes. From scene to scene the changes in frequency, envelope, reverb level, and other attributes create unique textures like those of an impressionist painting. When the exigencies of narrative return to the forefront, however, sound as such loses its hold over the

sound track, in favor of the familiar attributes of referentiality, linearity, and comprehensibility. Just as the telephone privileges understanding at the expense of frequency response and other basic sound qualities, so narrative has little use for texture, thickness, complexity, or any of the other unique qualities characteristic of the less narratively defined earlier segments of *Nashville*.

*Nashville's* subordination of a new sound technology to a narrative imperative is far from an isolated case. When Gaumont, Edison, and DeForest first attempted to introduce sound into cinema, only a lack of convincing synchronization with narrative characters prevented its success. When Western Electric first attempted to draw film industry attention to its new sound-on-disc system, little interest was shown, no doubt because of the resolutely matter-of-fact, lecture-like nature of the 1925 shorts featuring executive Joseph Craft. No narrative, no sale.

With the definitive coming of sound to the cinema world in the late twenties, yet another principle is affirmed. At first considered as appropriate to opera singers, floor shows, and the stars of international art and politics, sound film rapidly evolved toward specifically narrative uses of sound. Instead of developing the many innovative contrapuntal, non-diegetic, or abstract uses of sound championed by Clair, Balazs, and Eisenstein, sound film moved increasingly toward aural reinforcement of familiar continuity editing. Many a sound film begins with a balanced sound mix precluding comprehension, or with other unusual uses of sound; rare, however, is the film that carries these practices throughout, for as fiction films approach their conclusion, they begin to reduce what we might call the viewer's "freedom factor;" that is, they increasingly insist on leading all viewers to the single conclusion provided by narrative closure. As sound technique is codified during the thirties, the potential of sound cinema is slowly reduced to the point where nearly all non-narrative uses of the medium are stripped from standard usage. While the odd loner like Jacques Tati might manage to restore to film sound some of its long-existent possibilities, the needs of narrative representation preclude his founding an influential school.

With the application of stereo sound to feature films during the fifties, yet another new technology offers a high road to apparently revised sound technique. Not since 1929 had the cinema industry offered such a clear hope of direct aural spatialization of speech and other sound phenomena. It did not take very long, however, for Hollywood to recognize the unfoundedness of such a dream. Not that the new sound system was unable to localize



all sound sources — that was not the problem. Instead, filmmakers found that the precision of full-blown stereo led to severe restrictions in editing possibilities, especially during Hollywood's staple dialogue scenes. To locate in space is fine — as long as it doesn't interfere with the far more important ability to provide narrative location. Today, even in multi-channel films, dialogue is standardly directed to the center speaker alone.

Altman's use of 24-track follows the same trajectory. Though Altman and his chief sound men, Jim Webb and Bob Gravenor, successfully deploy the new technology in novel ways, they are unable to do more than delay the return of the narratively more satisfactory traditional techniques. As I have shown elsewhere apropos of microphones, the primary determinant in the development and application of new technologies is neither entirely economic nor immediately ideological, but properly representational in nature. With radio mikes and 24-track technology, the same principles hold. Non-hierarchical sound and balanced sound mixes may distinguish Altman's sound from that of his contemporaries, but when *Nashville's* twenty-four separate sound sources finally reach the Parthenon, they too succumb to the classical techniques of intermittent sound mixing and standard continuity editing.

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