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Gosford Park, the ‘Altmanesque’ and democracy

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Often working with large casts of actors—and many featuring on screen simultaneously, with dialogues frequently overlapping one another and given little hierarchy in the sound design—US director Robert Altman (1925–2006) came to be associated with a signature style despite working in a range of genres, mostly in order to subvert their conventions. The adjective ‘Altmanesque’ has come to apply to this aesthetic, one in which much is also left to chance, with actors given space to improvise and create their own characters within a larger tableau or ‘mural’ (del Mar Azcona 142).

Here we examine Altman’s 2001 multi-protagonist film *Gosford Park*, a British-American co-production written by Julian Fellowes, in the light of democracy. At once a parody of the Agatha Christie *whodunit* and of British costume drama, the film depicts a weekend party at an English manor house soured by the murder of the host. The question we will ask is how Altman’s aesthetic helps channel a critique of the British class system by giving greater prominence to the domestic staff than we are accustomed to expect in heritage cinema.

Similarly, we will consider whether, in deliberately undermining conventional *cinematic* hierarchies—especially those pertaining to the use of sound, image density and character identification—the ‘Altmanesque’ in *Gosford Park* also represents the democratization of spectatorship, as the director ‘wanted to make the audience find for themselves the drama in the situation’ (del Mar Azcona 142). Finally, this paper will ask if the ‘Altmanesque’, reinforcing as it does the notion of the *auteur*—the author-director figure in what is undeniably a highly collaborative medium—is in fact compatible with the notion of democracy at all.

The ‘Altmanesque’ and narrative democracy

Robert Altman is often associated with the New Hollywood filmmakers of the late 1960s and 1970s, the *Easy Riders and Raging Bulls* of Peter Biskind’s book covering the period. Yet unlike his peers Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola, Altman was not in fact a baby boomer fresh out of film school but already in his 40s

at the time of his first major film success, having risen the ranks making 'making industrial films in the '50s and by directing television in the late '50s and early '60s' (Armstrong 13). When success did come, though, with his Korean war satire *M*A*S*H* in 1970, many of the signature characteristics of his work were already evident, defined by Biskind as:

the improvisation, the ensemble acting, the self-consciousness that drew attention to the filmmaking, the loose-knit narratives that dispensed with the traditional beginning, middle, and end [...]. And finally, there was the layered soundtrack with overlapping dialogue. (Biskind 97)

These characteristics were to become so synonymous with the filmmaker's style, that the adjective 'Altmanesque' has been used to describe anything approximating it, a critics 'shorthand', as Maria del Mar Azcona suggests, for any kind of 'multi-stranded parallel storytelling'. No other filmmaker, she argues, used the 'multi-protagonist' format so so recurrently and consistently', turning it their 'auteur mark' (del Mar Azcona, 140-141). It is true that large ensemble casts characterize some of his best work, from *M*A*S*H* (1970) and *Nashville* (1975) in his New Hollywood heyday, to *The Player* (1992) and *Short Cuts* (1993) in his 90s 'comeback' period.

It also characterises *Gosford Park*, perhaps his last great film, although it is also apposite to mention that this film displays another facet of Altman's style: that of genre revisionism. In *Gosford Park*, there are several clear allusions to genre. The film purports to parody the Agatha Christie murder mystery, but also clearly evokes the British heritage cinema most often associated with Merchant-Ivory, the producer-director team behind a host of literary adaptations for the big screen, notably *A Room with a View* (1985) and *The Remains of the Day* (1993). While heritage cinema may display elements of other genres, it has nevertheless 'become a meaningful critical term which has elicited important debates' (Vincendeau xviii). It has also been used as a pejorative shorthand, and a rather reductive one, for a nostalgic mode of filmmaking 'suffused with the charm of manners and costume', which has made 'adaptation central to the mythology of Britain in international cinema' (Caughie 2000, 207). If *Gosford Park* suggests a hybrid of three distinct genres, the 'Altmanesque' multi-protagonist film, the Agatha Christie *whodunit* and the heritage film, all three offer avenues for the filmmaker in which to explore questions of democracy, and we will examine how.

The country-house *whodunit* is the perfect vehicle for Altman’s multi-protagonist aesthetic as such plots require a murder with a range of potential suspects. In *Gosford Park*, the victim, true to genre type, is someone nobody mourns, in this case a *nouveau riche* industrialist with vulgar manners who has married into nobility but on whom many extended family members depend for money. In such narratives, George Grella explains, the victim must be ‘worthy of his fate’ and a ‘exceptionally murderable man’, something which ‘prevents regret and also insures that all characters have sufficient motive’ (Grella 41).

William McCordle (played by Michael Gambon) is manifestly that man, hosting a weekend shooting party at the eponymous manor house for a number of guests including family members, friends, business associates and their spouses. Among the film’s speaking parts feature not only the 14 characters occupying the ‘upstairs’ areas of the house reserved for the hosts and their guests but a further 14 domestic staff and the two police officers who come to investigate the crime. Beyond the main plot of the murder, its suspects and their potential motives, lies a myriad of smaller inferences to various intrigues, rivalries and secrets. In the *Afterword* to the shooting script, the screenwriter Julian Fellowes sheds some light on how this complex network of relations was established, and how it evolved during the filming itself. Having been commissioned by Robert Altman and producer Bob Balaban, who also stars in the film, to develop a scenario paying ‘homage to the Agatha Christie tradition’, Fellowes describes having watched as many Altman films as he could, realizing that the film ‘would be one of interweaving characters and plots, the more the merrier’. Indeed, it was Fellowes’s idea to add a further group of characters into the mix, that of the guests’ maids and valets, as was customary ‘at that time and in that class’ (Fellowes 164).

Here we see how Fellowes was apparently tasked from the outset with developing a story that fulfilled the criteria of being both a ‘homage’ to Agatha Christie, having a sufficiently large cast to be considered ‘Altmanesque’, and having the kind of period authenticity that attracts fans of costume drama. It also offers us a window into the collaborative processes at work in film production that belie somewhat the notion of the *auteur*, an issue we will come back to.

The democratizing effect of Altman’s multi-protagonist filmmaking is twofold. Firstly, the normal processes of character identification are complicated. With such a number of speaking roles, the spectator feels a sense of disorientation. Happily, it is

a feeling shared in *Gosford Park* by one of its characters, Mary (Kelly Macdonald), a visiting maid with whom we ultimately enter the house, ‘through the servant’s entrance’, thus establishing ‘the film’s “below stairs” perspective’ (MacKinnon 26). Character recognition and identification is also facilitated in part by the preponderance of well-known faces in the ensemble cast, even if for most the roles were uncharacteristically small. Among the actors playing the roles of the upstairs characters we find Michael Gambon, Kristin Scott Thomas, Jeremy Northam, Maggie Smith and Charles Dance. Helen Mirren, Clive Owen, Derek Jacobi and Alan Bates meanwhile feature as domestic servants of varying seniority, and Stephen Fry features as a bumbling police detective treated as a menial by the McCordle family. Mary effectively becomes the film’s de facto sleuth, gradually discovering the truth behind the murder where the police fail, even if—contrary to genre convention—she does not act upon the information she acquires. And yet our identification with Mary does little to facilitate our comprehension, at least on first viewing, of the plot and its myriad characters, a fact exacerbated by other facets of Altman’s signature style.

One such particularity is the density of the image, brought about not only by the large cast but by the director’s propensity to fill the frame with as many characters at a time as possible. In *Gosford Park* the camera is often roving restlessly from one group to another, as in the early scenes in the drawing room in which the ‘upstairs’ characters are fleetingly introduced. Snatches of conversations are overheard as the camera gracefully passes by, as if representing the perspective of a domestic servant carrying refreshments. Julian Fellowes relates his own ‘panic’ on set as he witnessed such scenes being staged, with the actors ‘rattling through their lines, everything seemed to be happening at once, and the cameras wheeling here, there, and everywhere’. Expressing his relief that vital information in the script was not finally lost in a ‘chaotic talk soup’, he describes the resulting dialogues as ‘clear as a bell’ (Fellowes 173-174).

The issue of clarity in the sound design is debateable, but *Gosford Park* is his less radical in its use of sound than some of Altman’s earlier work, in which Altman’s overlapping dialogues and ‘democratic’ recording techniques were often a bone of contention with actors and studios. Yet the film still challenges ‘the artifice of one character speaking at a time’, a characteristic which ‘prevents passive reception’ as the ‘viewer must actively select which voice he will listen to from the jumble he hears’ (Yacowar 14).

Similar challenges to conventional cinematic hierarchies are made through the use of music. Except from the opening sequence in which we are introduced to the character Mary and Countess Constance, there is no extradiegetic music in the film. As we will see, most of the music in the film is intradiegetic and is employed in the service of discourse on class relations. Film music is most commonly used to “lubricate the spectator’s psyche and oil the wheels of narrative continuity” and, at its most conventional, was often “redundant because hyper-explicit, cheerful images redoubled with cheerful sounds, tragic moments underlined with “tragic” harmonies, and narrative climaxes carefully matched to swells and crescendos” (Stam 264). The lack of incidental music to accentuate what is seen on screen, while by no means unique to Altman’s work, is also designed to ‘make the audience find for themselves the drama in the situation’ (del Mar Azcona 142).

Another way in which Altman disrupts conventional cinematic hierarchies is in the way his films are shot. The density of sound is matched by what we see on screen, with Altman packing the frame with people and objects. This is particularly evident in the dinner scenes in *Gosford Park*, where the characters are viewed through the mass of opulent tableware cluttering the foreground. The director makes frequent use of a telephoto zoom lens, a technique that was an anathema to cameramen of the old school when the director first emerged as a star of the New Hollywood at the beginning of the 70s, who believed that ‘focus [was] at risk’ (Biskind 104). As Biskind goes on to explain, it was also disliked by actors, who would:

regulate their performance according to how far they are from the camera, but the director would stage a master shot packed with people, and then would reach through the crowd with the zoom for close-ups so that the actors were unsure if they were one face among twenty, or all alone. (Biskind 104)

In his early career, Altman preferred working with character actors and non-professionals, presumably because they were more inclined to tolerate his unconventional approach. According to Biskind, as with ‘other New Hollywood directors, for Altman the picture was the star, which is another way of saying, the director was the star’ (Biskind 95). The assertion is telling, for New Hollywood was ultimately about the ascension of the film director as film author, or *auteur*, an idea that had gained traction since the 1950s under the influence of the French magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which established the then-radical notion of ‘film as individual

expression' and in the *auteur* an 'artist whose personality was "written" in the film' (Caughie 1981, 9). Of course, film theory later evolved away from this rather narrow concept of authorship, taking into account 'the actual conditions of production which permitted and constrained the [...] self-expression of the *auteur*', preferring instead the less exclusive notion of 'director-centred criticism' (Caughie 2007, 408-409).

The issue for us is how to square the idea of a democratic mode of storytelling with the 'Altmanesque', a notion which also seems to suggest a rather exclusive, singularity of vision. It is worth mentioning here two facets of the Altmanesque: improvisation and spontaneity. Rick Armstrong, for instance, argues that Altman's 'way of making movies was to give actors as minimal direction as possible,' letting 'the actors improvise the dialogue' (Armstrong 8). This is the contradiction and tension at the heart of Altman's work, between a signature aesthetics and a collaborative approach, between the stamp of the *auteur* and the looseness of improvisation and spontaneity. As Robert Self argues, Robert Altman 'is a name that represents a certain cinematic heterogeneity and plurality' that might seem at odds with 'that apparent unity sought by the *auteur* theory' (Self 4). Yet it is exactly those qualities that make his work so recognizable. Altman's films stand as testament to both the collaborative, non-homogeneous spirit of filmmaking and also a consistency of approach to that craft.

Another aspect of Altman's aesthetic that tends to affirm its democratic credentials is the challenges presented to the audience. As has been argued, 'Altman's films encourage and require audience participation and their visual density is such that [...] the texts refuse to tell spectators where they should be looking and force them to increase their spectatorial activity (del Mar Azcona 145),' with similar claims easily made about the sound. This assertion is supported by Julian Fellowes, who explained that 'the writing had to be extremely economical' due to 'Robert Altman's belief that an audience has to pay attention and not be spoon-fed all the information. [...] Most of the information is given, or only suggested, once or twice' (Fellowes 167). More radically, when interviewed about his 2003 film *The Company* for Total film magazine, Altman argued of plot that: 'all the stories have been told. They're only about six or seven of them, which we've all seen a billion times. [...] Viewers can recognize the stories and finish them by themselves' (Altman, accessed online).

While Altman's apparent disinterest in concluding stories implies a desire to displace the audience's attention elsewhere, it is also clear that he expects active participation from the viewer. We might therefore call Altman's multi-protagonist works in particular 'writerly' texts, following Roland Barthes's conception of the term, the goal of which 'is to make the reader,' or indeed in this case, the spectator, 'no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text' (Barthes 4). It is this participatory, 'writerly' quality of Altman's work, and particularly *Gosford Park*, that I would also like to call democratic.

Class, democracy and popular culture

As previously mentioned, the film's playful dialogue with heritage cinema seems designed to raise questions about what constitutes 'quality' in British cultural production. Altman's fascination with genre seems at odds with British highbrow drama. *Gosford* was not the first time he had satirized or subverted the detective narrative, his adaptation *The Long Goodbye* (1973) imbuing Raymond Chandler's hardboiled hero with a then radical "Jewish sensibility", who alternates "clownish behavior with the gumshoe's ruthlessness" (Armstrong 13). He has conducted similar revisionist experiments on the Western, the musical and the war film, and yet box office triumph often eluded him, even if he was lauded as an *auteur* by critics. As Rick Armstrong argued, the genre revisionism meant that "the studios didn't know how to market" his films, which "subverted an audience's expectations of the way a caper, detective or western film should be" (Armstrong 7). Yet despite his formal experiments, Altman's films were not intended for the arthouse ghetto and most enjoyed widespread theatre releases in the US and abroad. A few, including *Gosford Park*, did achieve popular success and many attracted big-name celebrity actors.

More explicit, as concerns *Gosford Park*'s engagement with democratic ideas, is the questions the film raises about class thematically. It is no accident that *Gosford Park* is set in the 1930s in the build up to the second world war, for it was this conflict that was to prove particularly fatal for the kind of manor house, master-servant relations depicted in the film. As the screenwriter explains, the film was set 'as late as possible before the end of this way of life' (Fellowes 169). One of the stated aims of the film was to give more prominence to the roles of domestic staff so often seemingly relegated to the background in both the 'Golden Age' *whodunit* of Agatha Christie and heritage cinema. Robert Altman explained on set that the 'camera can't

be on the posh people unless a servant is present [...]. The [...] story is transmitted through downstairs gossip, through what the servants know' (Gritten, accessed online). When questioned on how easy such a story, featuring a cast of nearly 40, would be to follow, Altman replied 'I'm trying to let the audience discover the picture rather than throw it at them. [...] The audience has to pay attention' (Gritten).

Despite Mary's emergence as a figure of identification via her outsider status and de facto role as detective, we are confronted from the beginning with a plethora of different personalities, many played by famous actors relegated to supporting roles. This fact is in itself subject to ironic commentary when one of the valets accidentally stumbles upon a furtive conversation between one of the guests, Freddie Nesbit, and William McCordle's youngest daughter, Isobel. Some sort of affair between the married man and teenage girl is fleetingly suggested, with the latter snapping at the domestic servant for surprising them. To soothe her, Freddie replies 'Don't worry, he's nobody'. Although brief, this scene is quite telling in respect of the film's discourse. The upstairs characters treat the domestic staff largely as 'non-people' from whom it is barely worth concealing a secret, less still showing basic banners. This recalls Erving Goffman's analysis of the stagecraft at work in upper and upper-middle class homes, particularly when the owners are entertaining. For Goffman domestic staff constitute a 'non-person' because he or she does 'not take the role either of the performer or of audience'—or the hosts and the guests—despite being present. Indeed, a domestic servant is defined by both sets of persons as 'someone who isn't there' (Goffman 151). As Julianne Pidduck argues, the scene also 'elicits an intertextual irony, as [...] many spectators know perfectly well that this is Richard E Grant of [...] a score of other [heritage] films' (Pidduck 129), such as Martin Scorsese's 1993 adaptation of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, or James Campion's 1996 screen version of Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*. Incidentally, he also makes a memorable cameo in Robert Altman's Hollywood satire *The Player* (1991).

The equal footing given to the upstairs and downstairs characters in terms of dramatic emphasis matches Altman's aesthetic choices. As elsewhere in his oeuvre, seemingly 'unimportant characters, who apparently do not contribute much to narrative development, and incidental details leading nowhere abound' (del Mar Azcona 142-143) in *Gosford Park*. It is often difficult to know how significant a given element or implied subplot really is, as Altman often refrains from over-emphasizing

one facet of the narrative over another. As Warren Beatty once said of the director, ‘Bob has a talent for making the background come into the foreground and the foreground go into the background’ (Biskind 103).

This is particularly evident in the key scenes in which the real-life actor and singer Ivor Novello, played by Jeremy Northam, entertains the hosts and their guests at the drawing room piano. While the upstairs characters, notably Maggie Smith’s Countess Constance, express indifference and even boredom by the performance, the domestic servants are drawn from the dark corridors of the house to secretly eavesdrop on the music. This is signature Altman, who returned again and again to the ‘porous, social space of media celebrity and spectacle’ (Martin 17), with characters often undermining and crossing performance spaces.

At the end of this sequence two shots are virtually juxtaposed in which the listening kitchen staff and housekeepers are seen clustered together in a painterly arrangement as if in some form of tableau. Shown in soft light virtually unmoving, there is a sense that their positioning is artificial or overtly aestheticized, as if they have become part of the house’s luxurious décor. It could be argued that this constitutes an ironic critique of the nostalgia of which heritage cinema is often accused, with Ivor Novello’s rendition of the *Land that Might Have Been* floating wistfully through the corridors of the eponymous house. As Pidduck suggests ‘these visual details reinscribe working-class characters as a silent counterpoint to the concerns of the bourgeois protagonists [and] reflect upon an overwhelming erasure within the pastoral literary and cinematic tradition’ (Pidduck 123).

This erasure may well be overstated, however, given that the Merchant-Ivory adaptation of *The Remains of the Day* (1993), like Kazuo Ishiguro’s source novel, makes a manor house butler and housekeeper its central protagonists. Even John Caughie, so critical of the genre, conceded that work would have to be done to discern between those heritage films that transcend the nostalgic mode and those that do not, and to give “the representations of the national past in both film and television [...] the same attention as we used to afford to the Western” (Caughie 2000, 211-212). Other critics have questioned the assumptions behind blanket dismissals of the genre. Mathew MacKinnon pays particular attention to the way *Gosford Park*’s marketing campaign was ‘designed to maximize the appeal of the film to its core “heritage” audience by emphasizing its venerable British cast [and] heritage iconography’, while simultaneously distancing itself from ‘typical “Merchant

Ivory” fare by emphasizing its iconoclastic’ (MacKinnon 66) American director. Furthermore, he suggests, the name *Gosford Park* seems to suggest a ‘literary pedigree’ (MacKinnon 73), recalling canonical works like ‘*Mansfield Park*, *Bleak House*, *Howards End* [...] and *Brideshead Revisited*’ (MacKinnon 41), although it is, in fact, an original screenplay. This in itself reinforces *Gosford Park*’s democratic credentials, questioning the value-system behind notions of ‘quality’ that are often at play in British cultural production, particularly the role of literary adaptation in prestige cinema. As John Caughie argues, the “attempt to found a British tradition of quality” in postwar British television and cinema was often “expressed as a conscious desire for a national cinema distinct from the mere entertainment of Hollywood. The guarantee of that distinction was frequently adaptation either from texts which were already prestigious in theatre or literature” (Caughie 2000, 209). While *Gosford Park* apes the aesthetics of highbrow cultural production, a number of the film’s themes (as we will see) champion the democratizing force of the lowbrow. Nevertheless, we should recognize that the way the film was named and marketed was a deliberate appeal to fans of costume drama, whether their expectations are subverted or not.

Rather than employ the term ‘heritage cinema’ as an inherently pejorative term it seems therefore more pertinent to distinguish it from ‘nostalgia film’, which for Frederic Jameson ‘approached the “past” through stylistic connotation, conveying “pastness” by the glossy qualities of the image, and “1930s-ness” or “1950s-ness” by the attributes of fashion’ (Jameson 19). Yet even Jameson recognized the potential to harness these production values for social critique and a questioning of how we represent the past, arguing that

... it is by way of so-called nostalgia films that some properly allegorical processing of the past becomes possible: it is because the formal apparatus of nostalgia films has trained us to consume the past in the form of glossy images that new and more complex “postnostalgia” statements and forms become possible. (Jameson 286–87)

Can we consider *Gosford Park* a “postnostalgia” statement? The words to the song *The Land of Might-Have-Been*, which features in the aforementioned sequence and is repeated over the closing credits, suggests the film is playfully engaged with notions of both heritage and nostalgia:

Somewhere there's another land

different from this world below,
far more mercifully planned
than the cruel place we know.
Innocence and peace are there –
all is good that is desired.
Faces there are always fair;
love grows never old nor tired.

The atmosphere created by the song is almost one of longing for a prelapsarian world. While the notion that heritage cinema more broadly reflects a nostalgia for a period of more settled class distinctions is open to debate, there is little doubt that *Gosford Park* is playing with a *perception* of British cultural production and the way it is marketed internationally. *The Land of Might-Have-Been* evokes a fictional world, perhaps that of cinema itself, in which 'innocence and peace' reign and 'faces [...] are always fair'; yet is tellingly 'more mercifully planned than the cruel place we know'. It seems to acknowledge at once the illusion of cinema in aestheticizing the past while arguably looking forward to a more 'egalitarian era' (Pidduck 131). This argument is supported somewhat by Fellowes's comments about scenes featuring Ivor Novello at the piano, in which he describes the servants as being 'possessed with a kind of energy, an enthusiasm for sensation, while their employers are jaded and unable to accommodate the new' (Fellowes 172). It was a sign, he argues, that 'the upper classes were losing their grip on public life in Britain between the wars'. Whereas, in 'the nineteenth century when the theatre and opera had provided the great stars of the day [...] the twentieth century started to throw up forms, moving pictures, and popular music, which seemed to have more in connection with the working man than with them' (Fellowes 172). In this respect Novello is an astute choice as he was himself of working-class origins. Despite the fact that his 'celebrity, his classlessness, and his urbanity appeal to those below stairs,' Countess Constance upstairs 'makes it abundantly clear that he does not belong' (MacKinnon 56). When asked by his movie producer companion Morris Weissman how he can tolerate the snobbishness of the upstairs characters, Novello replies 'You forget. I make my living impersonating them.' The matinée idol and singer, for all his refinement and success, will never truly belong 'upstairs'. His Hollywood success, just like William McCordle's as a captain of industry, will always be vulgar new money in the eyes of his blue-blooded associates.

The theme of role play and performance is of particular importance in *Gosford Park*, as it is elsewhere in Robert Altman's work. The director liked to blur the boundaries on screen between performance and audience spaces, with his love of music evident throughout his work, in which intradiegetic music is ubiquitous. In *Gosford Park*, though, the blurring of the frontstage/backstage demarcation mirrors that affecting upstairs/downstairs relations. We discover that the line supposedly separating these groups has been traversed in a number of ways: there are a number of illicit sexual encounters between members of both groups, notably between one of the maids, Elsie, and William McCordle. The latter, we eventually discover, has a whole history of sexual relationships with vulnerable women in his employment, cruelly forcing them to abandon the resulting children in orphanages.

Elsie's improbable outburst in the dining room, when she feels impelled to defend William from criticism directed at him by his wife, shocks less because of what it reveals, but because it destroys the illusion of marital fidelity that the McCordles choose to maintain. As Erving Goffman taught us, 'stage-craft and stage management [...] seem to occur everywhere in social life' as people try to 'control the impression' (Goffman 26) others receive of a given situation. With her outburst Elsie has not created a moral outrage but has simply spoilt the stage-managed illusion of the evening. McCordle retires to his study to get drunk and is subsequently murdered.

The contrast, in Novello piano sequence, between the brightly-lit drawing room with the card-playing guests and the darkened corridors where the downstairs characters congregate to listen, is particularly redolent of the frontstage-backstage dichotomy. As Goffman argued about the bourgeois home, a 'back region or backstage may be defined as a place [...] where the impression fostered' by the hosts is 'contradicted as a matter of course' (Goffman 114). Referring to utilitarian areas which were traditionally off-limits to guests, he describes the 'backstage character of certain places [being] built into them in a material way [...]. In our society the decorator's art often does this for us, apportioning dark colours and open brickwork to the service parts of buildings and white plaster to the front regions (Goffman 125).

This is very much apparent in the way *Gosford Park* is shot, with the domestic servants entering the building through a utilitarian back entrance that is virtually subterranean. We see them dealing with their masters' laundry, making their food,

carrying their bags; mostly in areas deprived of natural light. The ‘backstage character’ of the servants’ areas is highlighted in the Ivor Novello scene by the fact that the drawing room literally becomes a performance space. The downstairs characters are relegated to the sidelines and, while they enjoy what they hear, they are frightened of being caught doing it, either by their so-called masters or by senior domestic staff.

The recurrent sideways glance to the backstage in the director’s work has led to some critics calling Altman a ‘master of the non-place’ (Martin 6). Here Adrian Martin appropriates the work of social theorists such as Marc Augé, who defined ‘non-places’ as transitory spaces such as transport hubs ‘needed for the accelerated circulation of passengers and goods’ and ‘the great commercial centres’ (Augé 34) which feature so prominently in our experience of the modern world. For Martin, Altman was interested in places of work and social spaces which are ‘permanently impermanent’ (Martin 15); a ‘non-place’ environment the ‘essential element’ of which ‘is that it is anywhere but home’ (Martin 7). In *Gosford Park*, the eponymous house is transitory for most of the characters, many of whom are guests, including various servants. Moreover, of those resident at Gosford, the vast majority are ‘non-people’ ultimately confined to utilitarian areas. The non-visiting members of staff, obliged to take quarters at their workplace, are at once at home and homeless. As the housekeeper Mrs Wilson poignantly remarks at the end of the film, ‘I’m the perfect servant, I have no life.’

Another democratizing element of *Gosford Park* is the playful parody of the Agatha Christie *whodunit*. Among the film’s many murder suspects is the butler, allowing for the immortal phrase ‘Perhaps the butler did it?’ to be uttered. This sop to convention was ‘foregrounded in the theatrical trailer’ along with actual ‘shots of an archetypal pipe-smoking detective’ (MacKinnon 66), the bumbling Inspector Thompson, played by Stephen Fry. Of course, in *Gosford Park* the butler did not do it, but true to convention he has his own secrets to hide. In fact, butlers very rarely turned out to be the culprits of such narratives, although the expression “‘the butler did it’ is commonly attributed to Mary Roberts Rinehart,’ whose ‘1930 novel, *The Door*, is notable for [...] the ending, in which the butler actually is the villain. (The actual phrase “the butler did it,” however, never appears in the text.)’ (Pederseen, accessed online).

Given the social milieu within which such yarns take place, however, domestic

staff are a regular feature of the *whodunit*. By the late 1920s, naming a domestic servant as culprit was considered sufficiently cliché for the Detection Club, a group of *whodunit* writers, to outlaw the practice. In author S. S. Van Dine’s notorious ‘Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories’ we find the stipulation that:

Servants—such as butlers, footmen, valets, game-keepers, cooks, and the like—must not be chosen by the author as the culprit. [...] It is a too easy solution [...] and makes the reader feel that his time has been wasted. The culprit must be a decidedly worth-while person. (Van Dine 220)

What Van Dine would have made of *Gosford Park* is no mystery. Not only are the culprits in *Gosford Park* mere ‘servants’, but so is the film’s de facto detective, the discretely inquiring maid, Mary. Worse still, Mary is Scottish, with an accent to boot, and the maid she befriends during her stay at the house, Elsie, is an outspoken cockney. This is important, as the ‘Golden Age’ detective novels that the film parodies ‘suggest the self-confidence of a class that took its own vernacular for the norm of correct English speech and that therefore found it necessary to put the speech of farm laborers, shopkeepers, and cockneys into quotation marks’ (Porter 135). As hardboiled American (but British educated) detective writer Raymond Chandler argued: “The only reality the English detection writers knew was the conversational accent of Surbiton and Bognor Regis” (Chandler 103–104).

Gosford Park evokes much of the discourse lurking behind the *whodunit* tradition. It introduces, for example, a pipe-smoking detective figure who immediately recalls the hero of Baker Street, but is revealed to have upper-class pretensions, claiming to have served on a committee with the late Earl of Trentham. Unlike the great Holmes himself, however, he does win the respect of his blue-blooded peers. The upstairs characters are disdainfully business-like with the inspector, cold-shouldering and interrupting him. It also becomes quickly apparent that the bumbling inspector possesses no gifts for detection at all, and treats his police colleagues with the same lack of courtesy as the upstairs characters show him. When asked whether he wishes to interview the housemaids about the crime, he replies peevishly: ‘I’m not bothered about the servants. Just the people who might have had a real connection with the dead man’, reiterating the snobbish sentiments behind the detective club rules. Like George the footman, the servants are ‘non-people’ and not, as Van Dine suggested, ‘worth-while’ participants in the drama.

In *Gosford Park*, of course, the servants are very much in the foreground, and constitute not only the genuine—if overlooked—suspects, but also the only viable investigator, in Mary, who manages to untangle the mystery. But their status as 'non-people' in the eyes of their employers is confirmed early on in the film when the visiting valets are told they must be referred to throughout the weekend by the surnames of their masters and not their own.

These peculiar social codes are thrown into disarray by the behaviour of Henry Denton, an actor friend of guest and Hollywood producer Morris Weissman masquerading as his footman, allegedly to research a film role. When his real identity is exposed, it is telling that Denton should find himself shunned by upstairs and downstairs characters alike. For Goffman, the notion of the impostor is threatening because it calls into question the value and status attributed to a particular social role. This is especially the case when the impostor's performance closely resembles the real thing, for it 'may weaken in our minds the moral connection between legitimate authorization to play a part and the capacity to play it' (Goffman 67).

Bob Balaban, the actor who plays Morris Weissman, is not only a movie mogul within the diegesis but the actual producer of *Gosford Park*. Yet the Hollywood subplot to the film is more than just a flippant in-joke. As Pidduck argues, this 'American cultural invasion' parallels 'Altman's own outsider's incursion into British period drama' while 'lamprooning both American popularism and the elitism of the English aristocracy' (Pidduck 84). When asked over dinner what his next film will be, Weissman replies *Charlie Chan in London*, before explaining that the film will not actually be set in the capital: 'Most of it takes place at a shooting party in a country house, sort of like this one actually', he says 'A murder in the middle of the night, a lot of guests for the weekend, everyone's a suspect'. Of course, for those viewers not already alerted to this through the film's publicity, this explicitly sets up our anticipation for the murder to come.

That a film should feature Hollywood showbusiness characters is not in itself indicative of an attempt to undermine the illusion presented. As Robert Stam explains, 'countless Hollywood films treat Hollywood itself as milieu, and focus [...] on the processes of film production' before asking us to consider whether such 'films idealize or demystify the cinema as an institution' or 'display an anti-illusionistic aesthetic' (Stam 77). *Gosford Park* definitely fulfils that criterion. The film's rhythm

and tone change considerably during the scenes in which the movie-making *mise en abyme* is most prominent. After the murder, for example, there is a sequence in which the dialogue from Weissman's telephone call in the hallway of the house seems to become a meta-commentary for not only what is taking place on screen, in some instances elsewhere in the house, but also the genre at large.

We witness Jennings the butler at one such moment carrying about his business in the strangely darkened hallway, but what we hear of Weissman's monologue acts in such a way as to make his behaviour suspicious: 'They don't talk. The butlers and the maids,' we hear him say, 'They stand. They watch'. Not only does this refer to the reduced role attributed to domestic staff in *whodunits*, but arguably in costume film more generally. In addition to the curious dark lighting in this scene, the echo of Weissman's voice in the hallway becomes increasingly pronounced as if to emphasize its situation between different levels of the film's diegesis.

While there is a suggestion that Weissman is shunned by the upstairs characters due to their unarticulated anti-Semitism, the Hollywood characters are by no means innocent. The theme of role-play is further complicated by the fact that while Denton enjoys late-night trysts as a footman with Sylvia McCordle, he also attempts to force himself sexually on Mary, a scene in which the logo of a film company is fleetingly glimpsed on his belt buckle. There is, meanwhile, a suggestion that he sometimes has sexual relations with Morris Weissman, who could possibly be exploiting his power over the actor in the movie business. In the scene in which this is implied, Denton refuses the producer's offer of a late-night visit, a rebuff for which Weissman crabily insists the actor plays his part to the full and gather his laundry. Despite the promise of a more democratic New World that the Hollywood characters seem initially to offer, the film hints that William McCordle's sexual exploitation of his factory workers is being mirrored overseas. According to Robert Self, 'Nearly all the Altman films [...] raise real questions about the role of media producers who traffic in illusion and violence' (Self 9). It is also worth noting that the Charlie Chan character, based on the books of Earl Derr Biggers, were long a target of Asian-American scholars who saw the fictional sleuth as 'a denigrating caricature of obsequiousness and self-effacement' (Rzepka 1464). The allusion thus serves as another reminder that, while the Hollywood characters might serve as a counterpoint to British elitism, the United States had its own struggles with racism and democracy

with which to contend.

The tendency in Altman's films not to ascribe unambiguously positive or negative characteristics to his characters thus becomes in *Gosford Park* part of its democratic vision. We have to choose our moral position vis-à-vis the characters, rather than have it forced upon us. Although the lack of total innocence in the narrative is somewhat typical of the *whodunit*, the film's class discourse is not. Just as Altman's aesthetic choices make the 'background come into the foreground and the foreground go into the background', we have to accept that, on the level of plot, normal character identification is frustrated in order to question the genre hierarchies we are accustomed to expect. The detective is not the hero who will restore order but a bumbling incompetent with upper-class pretensions; the true investigator a female domestic servant who decides not to act upon the information she has learnt. *Gosford* consistently pulls the rug out from underneath us. It subverts its highbrow production values with lowbrow genre parody, before undermining its detective plot with a *mise en abyme* questioning the motives of film producers. While Altman's democratic use of sound, image and character may be familiar hallmarks of his work, here they are channeled into class critique. An *auteur* he may be, but one who foregrounds heterogeneity over hierarchy, and playfully comments upon his own role within the diegesis itself.

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