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# The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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# Overlapping Dialogue

The quintessential and recognizable Altman trait of using overlapping sound and dialogue has been pointed to as a symbol of the messiness of real life, of making characters behave more as their real-life counterparts do. It is so much a part of how he is known as a director that Lily Tomlin and Meryl Streep used it brilliantly in presenting him with an Oscar for Lifetime Achievement in 2006.

Even in various screenplays with different writers, the final drafts indicated in some way Altman's desire to use overlapping dialogue. Not surprisingly, the Altman Archive contains documents that reflect how this signature overlapping was expressed on paper. There are a number of subtle marks within the scripts:

- In *Countdown* (1968) the writer puts the dialogue of two characters side by side
- In *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971) parenthetical cues begin to appear, but are very sparse and subtle
- By *The Long Goodbye* (1973) there are entire pages of parenthetical cues, clearly stating how overlapping is to occur

PRET A PORTER 1 9/1/94

MIRAMAX - LOGO

INT - Moscow Apartment Store - Day	Sergei buys a tie.	Music SCORE (HL)
EXT - Paris - Day	Spinning Shot to Eiffel Tower.	Music SCORE (HL)
INT - De La Fontaine Mansion - Day	Olivier gets a tie.	Music SCORE (HL)
INT - De La Fontaine Mansion - Day	Olivier chooses a suit.	MUSIC FAD BUMPER THEME "KITTY'S THEME 'I LIKE YOUR STYLE'"
INT - TV Set - Day	The Kitty Potter Report #1	MUSIC "EDUCATED BUMPER" "KITTY'S UNDERSCORE" "KITTY'S THEME 'I LIKE YOUR STYLE'" "MUSIC UNDER" "NEED TAPE OF KP OPEN"
EXT - Dog Show - Day	Tantpis introduces himself to Isabella.	MUSIC "RIGHT SAND PAPER"
INT - Simone Lo's Atelier - Day	A fitting day!	MUSIC "SONGS ???"
REEL ONE		
EXT - Airport - Day	Olivier steps from his limo.	2-H-1 SCORE (HL)
INT - Airport - Day	Sergei passing through customs.	Music SCORE
INT - Airport - Day	Kitty and crew set up.	

Handwritten notes: "NEED TAPE OF KP OPEN", "SONGS ???", "RIGHT SAND PAPER", "MUSIC UNDER", "EDUCATED BUMPER", "KITTY'S UNDERSCORE", "KITTY'S THEME 'I LIKE YOUR STYLE'", "MUSIC UNDER", "NEED TAPE OF KP OPEN", "SONGS ???", "RIGHT SAND PAPER", "MUSIC UNDER", "EDUCATED BUMPER", "KITTY'S UNDERSCORE", "KITTY'S THEME 'I LIKE YOUR STYLE'", "MUSIC UNDER", "NEED TAPE OF KP OPEN".

The archive also contains papers related to planning and tracking the capture of sound. Shown above is a sound cue sheet, and the panel background is diagram of a studio, both from *Ready to Wear* (*Prêt-a-Porter*, 1994).

CHANGE 10/6/66 31.

30 (Cont.)

Ross is concerned about being overheard. The door to the office is partly open. During the following, he goes to the door, looks out at the deserted outer office, and then closes the door.

ROSS: It's not --

ROSS: I backed you as long as I could.

ROSS: (he glares at Chiz but gives him the chance to unwind)

Ross takes a deep breath. Chiz is waiting to pounce again.

Stegler -- ROSS:

ROSS: This morn--

ROSS: He's been asked. He thought it over. I just heard from him...

Chiz is frozen.

He could have had the guts to tell me himself.

ROSS: No. He's got enough to think about.

CHIZ: He doesn't know...

DISSOLVE TO:

CHIZ: A civilian wouldn't do a thing like that. He might invent one, but he wouldn't use it. Why not just send the Voice of America up there and do it right? Send some babe with big beautiful teeth and a stack of pop tunes, how's ...

ROSS: But I know the machine, I know the bird, I know the mission, I know my skills. Well, who should I talk to? Who really calls the shots? The White House, the Russians, who's calling the shots? Because they're sending some damned geologist!

Script page from *Countdown*, 1968, written by Loring Mandel.

2 (Cont.1)

FLORA: (to J.J.) Do you want one of these, or not?

J.J.: Is he wearing a gun? (he crosses to the bar)

JEREMY: It's not a Colt. It's a funny little gun.

GILCHRIST: What the hell's he got a gun for?

JEREMY: It's a Swedish gun.

J.J.: A Swiss Swedish gun?

JEREMY: No. Not Swiss. Swedish.

The little knots of conversation and speculation go on as Shortreed, Derek and Sheehan stand in the kitchen looking out the window.

SHORTREED: He's not going any place. He's just getting something out of his bag. He's coming back in.

Sheehan hurries back to his bar, pushing Owl aside as he ducks under.

SHEEHAN: (to Owl) Will you get outta the way? (he moves to the cash register) Fix the corn.

Owl looks at him, his face a question mark.

SHEEHAN: (continuing) The corn. It's dripping. Fix it.

OWL: How?

SHEEHAN: Tie a rag around it.

Andy Anderson and Quigley are observing all this as they make a bet on getting a free drink out of the free bottle. (CONTINUED)

Script page from *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, 1971, written by Robert Altman and Brian McKay.

REEL FOUR PART A & B "THE LONG GOODBYE" PAGE 20

125 CONTINUED: CONTINUED: come on. 2-12 1373-04

126 FULL SHOT - Queta inside and on patio as CAMERA PANS L. with Eileen.

EILEEN - (laughing through speech) I'm sorry, Mr. Marlowe.

PHILIP - (not distinct) Oh, I'm sorry, too.

EILEEN - (overlapping above speech) He really doesn't like you very much, does he?

ROGER (off) - Hey, Marlboro! 8-11 1382-00

127 MGS - Roger and guests on another portion of patio. CAMERA DOLLIES IN toward Roger.

ROGER - Do you wanna dog, huh? 4-03 1386-03

128 MGS - Philip, Eileen and guests as Philip waves to o.s. Roger l.

ROGER (off) - Come over here, you son-of-a-bitch.

PHILIP - (not distinct) EILEEN - (overlapping above speech) Mr. Marlowe, are you sure you couldn't stay for a little while? He's getting really drunk. (continues not distinct)

ROGER (off) - (overlapping above speech) Come here. I wanna have a little word with you.

PHILIP - (overlapping above speech) I can't stay for too long. I'll just stay for (muttering not distinct)

ROGER - (overlapping above speech) I'll be damned. Look at this.

EILEEN - (overlapping above speech) Okay. Thank you. (continues)

- 108 -

Script page from *The Long Goodbye*, 1973, written by Leigh Brackett.