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The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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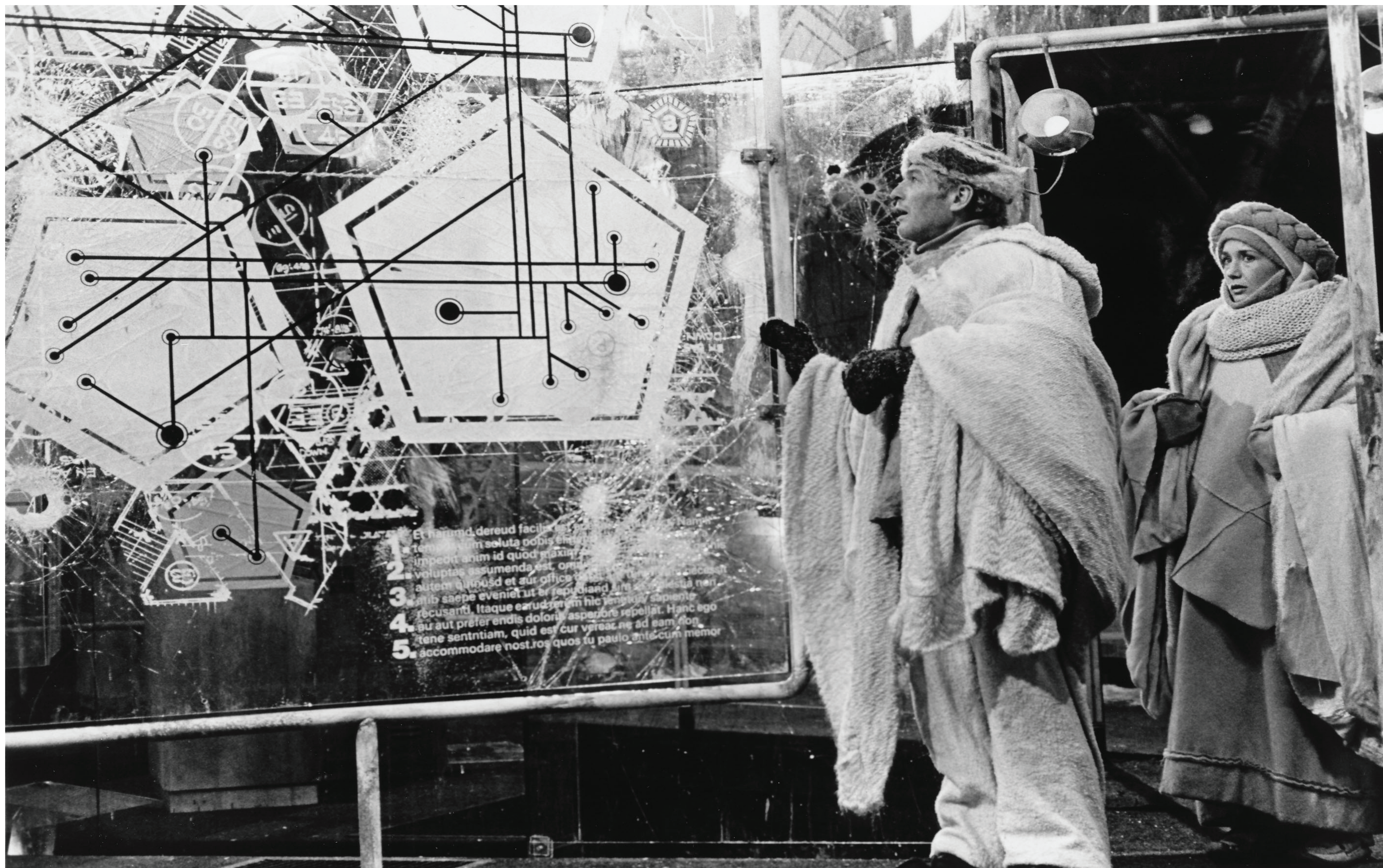
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Quintet [1979]

Quintet is Altman's post-apocalyptic science-fiction film. Set during an ice age, this society "occupies its time by playing a board game called 'Quintet.' For one small group, this obsession is not enough; they play the game with living pieces ... and only the winner survives." Overall, this film was not well received by critics or the public. However, the archive documents the unpublished efforts of one fellow filmmaker to urge critics to take another look -- Russian-born cinematographer Yasha Sklansky.

In summer 1979 Sklansky wrote an article-length letter to the *Los Angeles Times* concerning a movie review of *Quintet* by Frank Rich in *Time* magazine. In it, he staunchly defended the Altman film and the director's work, stating that the review by Rich was almost communistic, "unobjective, biased, and malicious." Sklansky recognized Altman as a complex artist, demanding both intellect and motivation to be understood. The newspaper was intrigued, but did not publish the piece, whereupon Sklansky sent it to *Time* magazine, which also refused it.



Lobby card for *Quintet*.

10746 Francis Place #:
Los Angeles, Calif. 91

Mr. Charles Champlin,
Arts Editor
Los Angeles Times

Dear Sir:

Here is the article (it's form is rather that of
of address') which we discussed in our telephone con
I turn to your newspaper because Los Angeles is the
of American cinematography.

Sincerely,
Yasha Sklansky
Yasha Sklansky.

losses, but discoveries as well. Do you really believe, Mr.
Rich, that Altman, being at the peak of his creativity, would
imitate and rehash something already known and tedious? You
may be sure, he is also aware of the new trends in the movies,
and if he undertook *Quintet*, something important must have
prompted him, and not an itch to manufacture a hybrid *Marien-
bad 2001*. And you as a critic would do well to understand,
discern, and evaluate it.

Altman's films give a deep, realistic, and impartial an-
alysis of contemporary society (*Quintet* is hardly an excep-
tion). At times we are annoyed at seeing that truth and
ourselves in an unattractive light. However, a great artist
cannot lie. There is a marvelous Russian poet and writer
Bulatt Okudjava. (Quite a few reviews similar to yours in
spirit have fallen to his lot. Nevertheless, he has survived.)
In one of his songs he very accurately wrote:
Everyone writes as he hears,
Everyone hears the way he breathes,
The way he breathes is the way he writes,
Without trying to please.
That is how Nature desired it.
It is not for us to judge the reason,
Why--it is none of our concern.
So does Altman write the way he hears, sees, feels, the
way Nature compels him. He is a complex artist, and one needs

"I read it and could not believe my eyes. It could just as easily have been an article in a Russian newspaper: just as self-assured and unsubstantiated, similarly unobjective, biased and malicious...it seems important for me to respond."

"He is a complex artist, and one needs both intellect and a keen heart to understand him. His films are not aimed at commercial success. Their worth lies elsewhere: in the search, in the discovery, the influence on society."

"The editorial staff of *Time* may well take note that since its magazine is one of the largest in America, its duty to society is, I think, to protect the talent in this country and not to fulminate against it. An artist whose way of thinking differs from that of the greater part of society is a treasure, not vice, of that society." - Yasha Sklansky