

Narratives of Politics and History in the Spectacle of Culture: Robert Altman's *Nashville*

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Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975) has long been recognized as a masterpiece in its treatment of the spectacularization of American culture through an ostensible examination of the country music industry. In this article I will consider the movie's critique of the ways that American politics, history, and culture are produced as simulacra through the media, with attention to the function of narrative in this production. [1] The movie presents these fields as scarcely available except as simulacra in a "society of the spectacle"; the social relations that *Nashville* denotes are mediated especially by the proliferation of visual images (Debord, 1995: 12). Much previous writing on *Nashville* has very effectively noted its critique of politics, history, and culture through its staging of their spectacularized forms -- I will refer to many excellent commentaries. What I propose here is that *Nashville* treats these domains as inseparable from the mechanisms of representation and simulation in which they take place, indeed as taking place solely and uniquely in them. Through reflexive strategies, the film doesn't stop short of implicating cinema, and indeed itself, in the systems of simulation that it examines. [2]

As a film that treats U.S. culture and politics in a time of crisis, *Nashville*'s critique underscores cultural operations that persist in their effectiveness into the present day. As in the mid-1970s, the U.S. currently finds itself exhausted from an unpopular war and divided over the proper way to end the term of a president viewed as a failure largely in connection with his handling of the war. Given the centrality of war and the presidency in U.S. popular national narratives, and the often surprising ways that these narratives implicate what they identify as American traditions and values -- indeed, they often play themselves out as historical progress toward or restoration of traditional Americanness -- I hope my examination will contribute to an understanding of the operations of these narratives in spectacularized culture.

Narrative and Electoral Politics

Although the word *narrative* has been considerably trivialized in the media discourse on the current U.S. presidential election, we shouldn't forget that the word has entered common usage because it has been among the most important terms in literary, cultural, and film criticism of the last forty years. Some have characterized narrative as a basic cultural operation, one of the principal ways that meaning is produced out of experience (White, 1981: 1-2). Most broadly, it is the operation by which individual or collective cultural identity is established: "in every minimal narrative it is possible to identify two attributes -- related but different -- of at least one agent and a process of transformation or mediation, which allows passage from one attribute to the other" (Ducrot and Todorov, 1979: 297). It is the

means of offering unity to disparate terms of experience, and time is the axis on which unification takes place. So any phenomenon involving history -- whether personal, social, political, national, or cultural -- necessitates narrative.

It is not surprising, then, that the term has taken hold in media discourse on U.S. electoral politics, since the ideological mediations of presidential campaigns always involve popularized historical narratives of U.S. progress, identity, and destiny. Even the most basic U.S. party division, "liberal" versus "conservative," which is being played out far more in the current election than in any since the early 1970s, involves two competing popular narratives of history, each hearkening back to a different tradition of presidents. Although the Republican Party frequently identifies itself as "the party of Lincoln," its affection for terms related to that of "rugged individualism" most closely identify it with one of the perceived founders of modern U.S. conservatism, Herbert Hoover, and general opposition to any state intervention in economics and society, even in times of severe crisis. The Democratic Party is unabashed in identifying itself as "the party of Roosevelt and Kennedy" (Obama, 2008).

Although Franklin Roosevelt's presidency, in the 1930s and 1940s, inaugurated modern U.S. liberal policies, which generally involve a notion of the state's broad responsibility for the welfare of the people especially during crisis, it is the face of John F. Kennedy, whose presidency was too short to be more than somewhat distinguished, that is reproduced without end. That the assassinated president is thus continually commemorated attests to the power of narrative: it is Kennedy's face that is of greatest popular value, as it conveys an optimism at once youthful and accomplished, identifying as such with a nation conceived at its inception both as young and as fulfilling the dreams of all of Western civilization. Kennedy's face operates as narrative in that the unification it offers addresses the division that Kennedy's death in 1963 continually represents, that of a national trauma in need of healing. This is the role that Kennedy plays in *Nashville*: proceeding through regular recurrences of his face and name, the movie's various narratives converge in the surprise of an allegorized retelling of the Kennedy assassination. This cinematic death does anything but heal the trauma, but rather in classically traumatic fashion repeats the event. [3]

In both *Nashville* and the current media discourse on the American presidential election, popular narrative fictitiously places Kennedy's death in a cliché and mythical time before the great divides of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. The latter is also a point of contention in the competing narratives of the election, as John McCain approaches the Iraq War with a narrative of the imperative of victory, over both the "enemy" and the wound that, as this narrative presents things, misguided policies inflicted on the American nation through supposedly deliberate failure in Vietnam. Barack Obama, authorizing his ascent to the presidency partly on the narrative of Kennedy, presents withdrawal as the only reasonable solution. More than his biography, policies, or achievements, Kennedy's face feeds the narrative involving him. That the person most representative of Kennedy's face and flesh, his only surviving child Caroline, endorsed Obama by declaring him to be "like my father" (Kennedy, 2008), demonstrates the enormous force of this narrative, and more generally of the role of popular narratives of national history in U.S. electoral politics. It is just this role and its implementation through spectacularized images that constitute the object of *Nashville's* critique.

Narratives in *Nashville*

In Altman's film, the examination of the operations of narrative functions through the deployment of a fragmentary, discontinuous narrative; this deployment presupposes the breakdown of narrative that accompanies cultural crisis (White, 1981: 4). As such, the aesthetic of *Nashville* belongs to the New Hollywood of the post-studio 1960s and 1970s, or the American "New Wave" (Russell, 1-3, 24-30). In partial debt to the French Nouvelle Vague, many American films of the period mounted reflexive critiques of the conventions of dominant filmmaking that remained, and continue to remain, in place. Such critiques are hardly unique in the history of cinema; but during this period, in western Europe and the U.S., one sees examinations aimed specifically at the commodification of cinema, more broadly at societies of consumption, as well as at the imperious and imperial politics of their states. Postwar cultural conformity, built on narratives of national unity and identity, are an issue in both the French and American New Waves, as is the involvement of each country in an imperialist war. Principal among the conventions to come under scrutiny in this strain of critical cinema are those involving narrative and the related syntax of *découpage* and montage. *Nashville* stands out in American cinema for the vast scope -- the panoramic vision, one might say, operating in tandem with Altman's use of the Panavision lens and aspect ratio -- of its indictments of American media simulations and its explicit engagement with politics as an American cultural phenomenon (Robert Altman, 2006: 89). The narrative of *Nashville* mediates the dispersed and fragmented fields of politics, history, and culture by allegorizing them as spectacle. [\[4\]](#)

Retreating from the star system and even the hierarchy of performances prescribed by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the movie presents twenty-four characters whose narrative importance continually varies. This number is already an aspect of the film's reflexivity: twenty-four characters in motion mediated by twenty-four frames per second, who thereby constitute an onscreen figuration of the offscreen cinematic process. And as Rick Altman signals, the twenty-four-track sound that Altman uses in *Nashville* is another aspect of this figuration (2000: 2; Self, 2004: 130). The movie's narrative is relentlessly digressive, moving from a presidential campaign that aims to stage a musical spectacle at Nashville's Parthenon, through the often seedy personal lives of the participants in this spectacle, and into the small stories of people who happen to be passing through or on the periphery of the scene. There is little to no correlation between a particular performer's status as star and his or her character's stardom in the narrative, nor between the narrative importance accorded to a star, within or without the filmic space, and that to an "ordinary" person (Keyssar, 1991: 31).

Altman extends this emphasis on the lack of cinematically attributed value of persons and objects through his use of the long take and deep focus. The practical purpose of these techniques, throughout Altman's career beginning with *M*A*S*H* (1970), is to allow actors unconstrained and extended movement within a shot. Their related aesthetic function (Plecki, 1985: 75-76; Byrne and Lopez, 1975-76: 13) demonstrates a debt mainly to the *mise-en-scène* of Jean Renoir and Orson Welles, as well as to André Bazin's valorization of Renoir's and Welles' realism. Opposing the "analysis" of reality into bits and pieces, Bazin held that the long take in deep focus offered an effective apprehension of reality (1967: 34, 36); he saw it as providing a more powerful and active engagement on the part of spectators with reality than they might have with both a movie primarily reliant on montage and reality without the intermediary of film (1967: 35-36; Keyssar, 1991: 36-37). However, the critique of Bazin's notions that one may derive from Altman's work is along the lines of that made by Jean-Luc Godard: Godard borrows from these notions, in order to question them, in the opening long take of *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*, 1963), in which an image of the camera ends up filling the

screen in order to block any view or appreciation of the world being filmed (Bersani and Dutoit, 2004: 34-35.). Thus, the audience sees the basic mechanism of cinema as actually detracting from a true apprehension of reality -- and in the course of *Le Mépris*, such an apprehension and the satisfaction that would ensue from it become increasingly untenable.

Altman's engagement with narrative similarly underscores the reflexive and allegorical dimensions of the movie's images so as to stage the difficulty, if not the outright impossibility, of apprehending the various aspects of the reality ostensibly represented onscreen. Here simulacrum and allegory are related in that they both involve images that call into question the integrity of a reality that presents itself as determinative, valorizing instead the semiotic relations of which an apprehension of reality consists. Simulacrum and allegory thereby offer strategies of engaging in a critical position with regard to the means by which such reality is instituted as firm ground. The fragmented narrative of *Nashville*, composed of many small, disconnected narratives, underscores the semiotic character of simulacrum and allegory and their oblique relationship to reality. For Godard as well as Altman, film doesn't expose reality but rather allegorizes it through a translation by cinematic rhetoric -- film is the production of an affirmative simulacrum. In the case of *Nashville*, allegorization bears especially on those realms most constitutive of social reality, culture, history, and politics (Quart, 1978: 118). Hence, Altman offers this Panavision of social reality in order to invite spectators to view it as unavailable to a coherently narratable totality. The movie's narrative cannot, then, be described by any sort of formula; it comes to an end with the provisional finality of the Kennedy-like assassination of singer Barbara Jean (Ronee Blakely) that is only tenuously related to narrative causality. Characters contribute narratives in the form of the stories of their own lives, and through the artistic means of songs that tell of history, personal struggle, and a range of emotions; but as simulacra, these stories attest to the inaccessibility of history and affect in the spectacle that imposes itself on social reality.

Musical Stars

Nashville becomes historical, political, and cultural allegory when the narrative it presents, involving a ruptured and rupturing series of events that is indifferent to the people living through it, collides with attempts by the characters to make narrative sense of the series. Integral to this strategy is the movie's implication of itself in the reality it depicts: it figurally identifies itself with the city that is its ostensible object of representation. Such implication begins between the opening credit sequence and the "start" of the narrative. The credit sequence is a blatant pastiche of a cheap TV commercial for a compilation recording of the hits of yesterday: clips of the songs play in the soundtrack at such a volume as to clash with the hammy voice-over narration that names the actors instead of the songs. The image that whirls out of the background to become too large in the foreground could be that of a record album cover -- it is labeled "Original Motion Picture Soundtrack" -- except that it is not square but rather vertically rectangular. (This image does, however, closely resemble the cover of *Nashville*'s soundtrack album.) Already the movie is disorienting in that it is difficult to say just what it is presenting: the soundtrack we are hearing, a separate record album, or a collection of songs loosely linked to the people singing them. "With twenty-four -- count 'em, twenty-four -- of your favorite stars!" proclaims the voice, emphasizing the number and proceeding to name them, in no order of precedence except the banality of alphabetization. As each name is mentioned, we see an image of the actor: it is a drawn image, not a photograph. The credit sequence thereby distances itself from the claims cinema could in 1975 make, and still attempts to make, to documentary realism and transparent representation.

This quasi-cartoon image of Nashville and the exhaustion of its music are overly punctuated by a repetition, in sound and image, of the name "Nashville." The credit sequence ends in silence and a black screen, with only the word "Nashville" in unornamented white block letters; in a dissolve the word becomes the version of itself printed on the banner hanging on the garage door of the headquarters of presidential candidate Hal Phillip Walker. This banner is decorated with images of the Tennessee state flag, a red, white, and blue design based on the American flag -- the latter plays a large role throughout the movie. Through this juxtaposition of the two sequences, Nashville the movie, Nashville the city, and Nashville the country music industry become metonymically condensed in the name they share. And Nashville the city is both metonymically and metaphorically tied, through the image of the flag, to the state of Tennessee, the American South, and the U.S. itself.

Figures of America

In the image of the country music industry that Altman offers, the tendencies to conformity -- which emblemize those of American society -- are concentrated in the singer denominated at Opryland by the metonym "Mr. Nashville himself," Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson). The name "Haven Hamilton" in turn functions polysemously, embodying, according to Helene Keyssar, "both the myths and history of old America" (1991: 138). In the second sequence, tied to the first by a sound overlap in which apparently nondiegetic music becomes diegetic when we view the scene of its production, Hamilton is recording a patriotic song, "200 Years." The lyrics of this song put forth a causally unified narrative simulacrum of American history that offers a streamlined closure in the U.S. bicentennial of 1976, the year in which the narrative is set (one year after *Nashville's* release). Hamilton stands like a cowardly president in the protection of an isolation booth while he surveys the many people involved in this studio recording. In spite of current war, violence, a failing presidency, a constitutional crisis, and other continually opening wounds, he sings over a musical arrangement supported by a drum playing a march rhythm:

My mother's people came by ship

And fought at Bunker Hill

My Daddy lost a leg in France

I have his medal still

My brother served with Patton

I saw action in Algiers

Oh we must be doin' somethin' right

To last two hundred years

The most howling of the omissions from this bicentennial song is the war that tore the United States to pieces, the Civil War, the memory of which still sets the Southern U.S. apart. This persistent cultural and political division in the U.S. metaphorizes similar divides throughout American society, as well as those between the U.S. and the rest of the world: the American

empire is suggested by the small, inconclusive, yet regular allusions and references to the Vietnam War. Recalling the recently ended conflict, in a subsequent verse Hamilton sings:

I pray my sons won't go to war

But if they must they must

And toward the end of the song, in a show of rhapsodic climax:

We're all a part of history

Why, Old Glory waves to show

How far we've come along till now

How far we've got to go

These words invoke that peculiarly American fusion of the unity of family life and the existence of the flag: the flag authorizes the maiming and killing of family members, but all for the sake of a fleeting and fleeing image of unity and goodness. The line "We're all a part of history" indicates the necessity to engage in narrative and strive for the sense of completion that it might bring, if this goodness is to be realized. This early small narrative bears one of the distinguishing marks of many of the other small narratives that emerge in the movie, an elision of the visible scars of the very violence it ostensibly addresses.

With regard to the national division the film works with, Nashville the city functions as an emblem of the American South: at the end of the War of 1861-1865 it was near the geographical center of the South, a position that led to Vanderbilt University's development there after a donation from industrialist Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1873. Mentioned once in the movie, when Hamilton informs the Opryland audience of the hospital where Barbara Jean is recovering from a collapse and asking them for a show of sympathy toward her, Vanderbilt was one of the most recognized of the Nashville universities whose existence contributed to the designation of the city as "the Athens of the South." This denomination led to the construction of the Nashville Parthenon, which Altman ingeniously displays as the simulacrum of Western history and culture, the myth of the culmination of Western empire in America. But even the tiny segment of history involving the Parthenon is skewed in the movie: toward the end Hamilton's attorney Delbert Reese (Ned Beatty) briefly explains to Walker's advance man John Triplette (Michael Murphy) that Nashville came to be called "the Athens of the South" because of its Parthenon. *Nashville* continually renders every bit of history as open to fictionalization through a jarring of causal relations among narrated events. During the Civil War Tennessee was particularly torn by the brutality of history, with half the state seceding, Nashville almost on the dividing line. Hamilton's song completely effaces such violence and divisiveness. In similar fashion, other narratives, many conveyed through song lyrics and the smiling faces of those singing them, tell stories of unity and happiness that blatantly differ from the portrayed lives of the singers and the other characters.

An excellent example of this operation is another of Hamilton's tunes, "For the Sake of the Children," which in obvious fashion builds on a simplistic set of "family values." He sings the song in *Nashville's* first Opryland showcase. The sequence is composed mainly of medium shots, with a few medium close-ups with a zoom lens that emphasizes Gibson's

distance from the camera and the screen. Hamilton performs with a limited series of stock facial expressions so as to emphasize the facile pathos conveyed in the song's lyrics.

Unpack your bags

And try not to cry

I can't leave my wife

There's three reasons why

There's Jimmy and Cathy

And sweet Lorelei

For the sake of the children

We must say goodbye

It is not merely that these values are simple and manipulatively deployed in order to appeal to sentimentality: the song delves into the banality of two Middle American names, "Jimmy and Cathy," followed by a name that semantically belongs to a Southern, "roots" past, a cliché from a different register, "Lorelei." These values are in addition undercut in their very enunciation. If the character singing them has had an affair, he has already abandoned the family values to which he claims to be returning in order to patch the wound he has opened -- the values the singer draws on, duplicated in this ironic enunciation, are empty, ineffective images. And this small story is in conflict with Hamilton's own life: *Nashville* reveals that he and his wife have separated, that he lives with a woman, Lady Pearl (Barbara Baxley), to whom he doesn't appear to be married, and that his son Bud (David Peel), now in his mid-twenties, spent at least part of his early life in this nontraditional family setting. The song thus comes off as wish-fulfillment, a simulacrum presenting an alternate outcome to a painful situation, a trauma-denying narrative.

Images and Violence

The continual clash between these small narratives and the realities they deflect and refract contributes to the disrupted and disruptive narrative of the film, an allegory of the vagaries, randomness, and violence of history. The portion of popular art represented in the movie, the production and industry of country music, is both a counterpoint and a mirror to Hollywood and the media conglomerates, consolidating in the 1970s, in their efforts to present a single, unified image of the country. Peterson documents that the initial founding of country music in the 1920s built on a chosen type of "authentic" American, the British-descended Appalachian; this type stemmed from late nineteenth-century efforts at the creation of an American identity (1997: 215). In the movie, *country* music is both a metonym for these efforts and a metaphor for the production of spectacle that has taken over social life in the U.S. and, more broadly, societies of consumption. Both Altman and *Nashville's* screenwriter, Joan Tewkesbury, have said that part of what contributed to their image of Nashville is the smaller and more tightly controlled Hollywood of an earlier era (Gardner, 1975: 26; Byrne and Lopez, 1975-76: 19). A number of times Altman has stated that *Nashville* is "my metaphor for America" (Michener, 1975: 46).

The movie issues so many signals of nationally traumatic events that render a unifying narrative both urgent and impossible, or rather possible only as a tenuous simulacrum produced through recourse to a nostalgic past: the split in the U.S. population over Vietnam, a partial repetition of the U.S. Civil War with regard to both domestic politics and foreign policy (one of the characters, Pfc. Glenn Kelly [Scott Glenn] is a soldier on leave who has been to Vietnam), and the ruin of the phallic, unifying office of the presidency by the Kennedy assassinations and Nixon's Watergate scandal. [5] Barbara Jean's death at the end of *Nashville* blatantly repeats Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, Texas, which occurred on a visit to improve relations concerning the advancement of civil rights with a state linked to the old South on this question. The recurring images and words of both Kennedy and Nixon in the movie don't so much constitute integral portions of the narrative as they do suggestions here and there that contribute to the series of images that *Nashville* puts forth.

Early in the movie one sequence opens on a close-up of two illuminated red, white, and blue signs at night, one above the other, indicating "Old Time Picking Parlor" and "Live Bluegrass Music," while classical bluegrass begins playing. Again, the colors relate this part of country music to the country, the United States. That this music is designated as "old time," and that it is bluegrass rather than mainstream commercial country, suggests a nostalgia for an authentic Americanness. [6] In addition to distinguishing the musical style, "picking" connotes the selectiveness with which the images of "old time" America are chosen and hence their character as simulacrum. The scene cuts to a wide shot that shows the parlor's location right next to Hal Phillip Walker's headquarters, as several campaign workers dressed in red, white, and blue put leaflets on a car.

As the band starts to sing, "*Mississippi River keep on rollin'/Push your muddy waters down to the sea,*" appealing to a nostalgic version of a profound Americanness and its broad geographies, the camera cuts inside. It immediately pans to the right, beginning on an image of a smiling, boyish John Kennedy, exactly the sort that since soon after the president's death has been presented in the U.S. to signal a cliché and mythical time of innocence and national unity. The photo, on the left wall, is in black-and-white and appears at an oblique angle, suggesting the elusiveness of the image of Kennedy and its connotations. The panning continues to a poster, presented frontally but obscured by a light fixture, from a national tourist campaign of the 1970s. The poster bears the slogan "Discover America" and the logo of the campaign, an American flag rendered as a weathervane arrow that in the image points to the bluegrass band; it shows a man in a suit, carrying a stars-and-stripes shopping bag, who more than slightly resembles Richard Nixon. The slogan, alluding to the notion of a "New World" that continually offers a "new frontier" (a principal catch phrase of the Kennedy administration), indicates the very thing that everyone in the movie is at once attempting and avoiding: a discovery of just what America is with regard to their own lives. But the only option that *Nashville* reveals for such narratives is the consumerism of image culture. That the poster is partly hidden demonstrates the difficulty of such a discovery, which ends up as an apprehension of social reality through simulacra. The camera follows the arrow to reveal, or discover, the band, yet another image of American culture that in its claims to present the latter shortchanges its audience, as any commodity must in order to function efficiently.

As the camera continues, it turns out that this site of an often marginalized musical genre fully belongs to mainstream country: Lady Pearl is sitting next to the stage, nodding her head in time with the song; the parlor turns out to be hers as well as a gathering place for a number of the luminaries of the music industry whom the movie is introducing. The ostensibly pacifying atmosphere is very quickly disrupted by a shot that gives a glimpse of one of the

movie's strife-ridden married couples, Bill (Allan Nichols) and Mary (Cristina Raines) of the folk-rock trio Bill, Mary, and Tom. Later in *Nashville* it turns out that Lady Pearl has a fascination for the Kennedys (in keeping with the nostalgic function of the first image of the late president), coupled with a wish-fulfillment concerning the various national divides that in its vehemence tends to reproduce them. Her interest also comes out in a nightclub, another scene of the appearance of community where the smiles are wide and the personal and social tensions high. Lady Pearl expresses it in a tearful monologue to dubitable British journalist Opal (Geraldine Chaplin). Opal is responsible for bringing out a number of the small stories of the film: in the role of this European journalist who can approach the U.S. only through clichés and stereotypes, Chaplin engages in a verbal and visual slapstick that is a stunning variation on aspects of her father's repertory. She plays Opal as unrelenting with her simulacra against a brute reality that viciously resists them. In 1999 Chaplin explained that Altman asked her to be his onscreen stand-in, the media representative trying to make sense of events who simply renders them through attempts at narrative as a fragmentary and comic affair (Stuart, 2000: 65).

Opal begins her conversation with Lady Pearl by noticing the latter's Kennedy campaign button and responding with her typically incorrect conviction that the South voted uniformly against Kennedy. Hesitant in narrating this aspect of Kennedy's itinerary, Lady Pearl provides a series of descriptions, facts about the few southern states in which Kennedy didn't win a majority and the precise number of votes he and "the asshole" (Nixon) received in Tennessee in the 1960 election. When she is able to provide a narrative explanation, she attributes Kennedy's loss in Tennessee to a social and cultural divide, that of the "anti-Catholicism" of "these dumbheads around here" who are "all Baptists and whatever, I don't know." She then takes recourse to the series of media images around Kennedy's assassination: the killing of purported gunman Oswald on national television, Jacqueline Kennedy's very famously bloodstained "little pink suit." She follows up with a similarly emotional and broken account of Robert Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign, which also ended in the Senator's assassination. Her explanations are strikingly dependent on pathos and devoid of political argument, pointing to the suppression of politics in U.S. simulacra of it. The narrative of her monologue is further broken up through its intercutting with other bits of action in the club, involving the music of acclaimed bluegrass and country violinist Vassar Clements playing himself, professional backstabbing, and relationship dysfunction.

Replacing Narrative

The ruin of social, historical, and political cohesion is addressed by Hal Phillip Walker, the presidential candidate whom we've seen -- or rather whom we haven't seen except through his various banners and flyers -- and whose voice (supplied by Thomas Hal Phillips) we've heard. Through his "Replacement Party" Walker is selling an alternative to the void left by the trauma of national divisiveness and loss. Ostensibly arriving on the scene to "replace" the corruption and self-serving nature of contemporary elected officials, particularly the lawyers in Congress who have no contact with a classically American idea of the "people," Walker in effect promises to replace the decayed image of U.S. social and political life. His alternative has its own nostalgic aspects: his slogan is "New Roots for the Nation," which ties in well with the traditions that country music claims to embody in its often facile attempts to strike widely appreciated chords of sentimentality. In the allegory of *Nashville*, Altman indicates the deep wounds traversing the country, which can't be healed but only anaesthetized by the kitsch narratives, clichés, and simulacra produced as spectacle in the media apparatus. At the end of the movie, though, when the various strands of narrative appear to be converging, they

suddenly collapse. Through the unsettling death that caps the finale of the movie's spectacles, these stories become part of the allegory in which the narrative of such phenomena as Kennedy optimism has failed.

The emblem of national kitsch narrative is Nashville's Parthenon. Built with a plaster façade for the Tennessee Centennial in 1897, an event that partly functioned as a plastering of the wound that the state had acquired a few decades earlier, it is a close replica of its model. The Parthenon that *Nashville* displays is actually a simulacrum of this one, a version reconstructed out of concrete in 1920 when the city of Nashville elected to keep the monument as a distinguishing feature (Parthenon). In the movie the building becomes the simulacrum of Western history and culture; it imposes itself as the completion of the narrative of history by linking the culture of the country to fifth-century Athens through simulation -- finally tied to a contemporary American empire by the flag hanging on it. [7] As such a simulacrum, it offers an apt site for the media spectacle of the musical art of the country, which is also the spectacle of a presidential candidate. In one respect this Replacement Party candidate doesn't replace most of the others with regard to the show of patriotism, a facile commitment to a cliché image of America, by displaying the flag. Altman implicates the cinema and his own film in this simulacrum of Western culture, empire, and the images of American ascendancy in panning, panoramic shots. In the third shot in the sequence introducing the Parthenon, the camera momentarily captures the monument such that the image becomes a quasi-abstract figure of three rectangles (the frame, the Parthenon, and the flag): the first contains the second and the second the third, and their ratios are in evident proximity to one another.

But instead of the success of this candidate who would unseat the complacent, unresponsive, conformist leaders, there is the failure of death, the repetition of the trauma of assassination; the emptiness in the signification of this event amounts to an allegorization of the intractable shattering force of history. There is a visual allusion to the Kennedy assassination when Walker's entourage arrives at the Parthenon: the image shows two black Cadillacs, one of them flying a U.S. flag, escorted by police motorcycles and cars. This presidential candidate's motorcade recalls the most widely and lengthily viewed presidential motorcade, that of the Dallas murder by way of its innumerable and endlessly repeated media images. During this sequence, the soundtrack plays its only fully nondiegetic song, the Barnetts' "Trouble in the U.S.A.," the one tune in the movie that solemnly acknowledges the troubles signaled throughout: war, Watergate, and economic depression (Russell, 1995: 194-95). The evocation of Kennedy's death builds up until the final sequence, but only to indicate that the new assassination can't be explained by the old, and also that the proclaimed replacement is the return of the same, which also eludes explanation. It is not even the candidate who is killed, as narrative expectation might have it, but rather Barbara Jean (Beaver, 1983: 50).

Senseless Death

The death, with its bright red blood on Barbara Jean's bridal-white dress, bursts the comfort that the singer has just evoked through her final song, "My Idaho Home," which tells the story of growing up with loving but struggling parents. The song is nostalgic in its images of home, farming, Middle America, inner strength, rising expectations, and family life, but it is more detailed and complex than Haven Hamilton's straightforward sham appeal. With a notable range of facial expressions, Ronee Blakely also gives her character far more dimension than Hamilton's stage persona. Barbara Jean sings not only of the joys of growing up, but also of the hardships her family faced for several generations. Nonetheless she ends on a note of reassurance, dedicating the song to "Momma and Daddy" when she finishes,

thereby reaffirming in simple fashion the family values that in singing she was beginning to complicate. Moreover, during the full-scale breakdown sequence at her earlier performance in the movie, she tells a disconnected story that suggests a mother who pushed her into professional singing at a young age, who hence clashes with the nurturing mother of "My Idaho Home." The Parthenon song sequence is composed mainly of medium close-ups and close-ups, through a zoom lens, of Blakely, alternating with reverse shots of the assassin Kenny (David Hayward). The camera draws Kenny out of the anonymity of the crowd; the expression on his face is indeterminate, somewhere between blank and threatening. At one moment Kenny's eyes appear to go up, and the next shot is of the flag, with the wind blowing one slow ripple through it so as to emphasize its imposing stature, entirely filling the screen. Whether Kenny is acting in favor of, against, or with indifference toward the patriotism the flag connotes is uncertain. That is, the flag is presented as bearing a meaning that empties itself through imposition.

During the song, Kenny unlocks his generically incongruous gangster's violin case. As Barbara Jean is bowing with Haven Hamilton, who is about to hand her a bouquet, a shot sounds and quickly dulls the applause. Barbara Jean drops undramatically onto the stage, a bright red surface that matches the color of the blood that suddenly appears on her dress. This coincidence of color underscores the nonrepresentational, allegorical character of Barbara Jean's blood and death. Blood also appears on Hamilton's white suit: like John Connally, the governor of Texas who was in the front seat of Kennedy's limousine, he is shot in the arm. His next lines are among the most interesting in the movie: "Y'all take it easy now -- this isn't Dallas it's Nashville -- you show 'em what we're made of -- they can't do this to us here in Nashville!" Although this assassination in *Nashville* is a repetition of the one in Dallas, Hamilton immediately refuses their resemblance; the words "they can't do this to us" suggest a denial of what has just happened, even as Barbara Jean lies dead at his feet. It is essential to the denial that it seek refuge against "Dallas" in the comforting envelope of "Nashville," the anesthesia that the country music industry offers through the media, that *Nashville* displays in its series of allegorical images. One shot then shows Walker's motorcade speeding away surrounded by police sirens; it contradicts Hamilton's declarations by augmenting the uncanny resemblance of the scene to Dallas.

Hamilton confirms the status of Nashville when he immediately directs the spectators away from the void of death by commanding them to sing, to engage in just that reassuring activity that Nashville offers the country. Taking the cue is Albuquerque (Barbara Harris), a benign psychotic with delusions of stardom, who sees her phantasms actualized when she stumbles to center stage. In a booming voice, she leads the Fisk University choir and the crowd in a rendition of a hit by folk-rock singer Tom (Keith Carradine), "It Don't Worry Me." This song derives from an image of the 1930s: Carradine initially wrote it for his role of a depression-era hobo in Robert Aldrich's *Emperor of the North Pole* (1973), in which it wasn't used (Stuart, 2000: 35). In that context, the song may be understood as the refusal of a man displaced by the overreaching of capitalism to be victimized by his situation. But in its pop-folk version, "It Don't Worry Me" is the contrary of "Trouble in the U.S.A.": the refrain turns out to be an aggressive declaration of disengagement from social and political ills in the burgeoning culture of consumerism. As a group chant it becomes a collective confirmation of anomie. The hapless Opal completes the movie's dialogue with an immediately comic question as she rushes through the crowd with her camera: "What happened? Can you please tell me what happened?" But as stand-in for Altman, the director and ostensible narrator of the rush of images that *Nashville* has been, she is not just the journalist who has cluelessly

missed the central event of the sequence; she is also the one who affirms that this event and those preceding it insist on that question, to which there isn't a definitive, sensible answer.

In the spectacle that *Nashville* presents and constitutes, a flux of images of social, political, and cultural life in the globalizing American empire, no narrative offers an even partially satisfying explanation. In the very avoidances effected in its proliferation of narrative simulacra, the movie instead offers an allegorization of such life. It is through cinematic allegory, an ensemble of images that suggest trouble in a landscape that would like to present itself as serene, that a critical disposition toward this life begins. *Nashville* offers an image of America in which any true America remains elusive, to both characters and viewers, one that is quite pertinent to the current crisis of cultural and political identity in the U.S. *Nashville* thereby suggests ways of understanding the miseries of a society of mediating and mediated images that don't depend on totalizing narrative or plenary representation. The movie's characters, the dominant tendencies of late twentieth-century and current U.S. cinema, and U.S. popular political and cultural narratives strive for such totality. The abuses of politics, both domestic and imperial, and those of a downhill economy become apprehensible in the small allegorical images of their effects that *Nashville* rigorously generates. Returning to *Nashville* in the present day because of the critique it offers of U.S. culture, politics, and history is a valuable exercise in considering how narrative and image production operate in the current crisis.

Notes

[1] Much has been said about the simulacrum in recent theoretical debates. I understand the term in a sense that derives from Platonism: a decayed image, the image of an image, and not an image that participates in the grounding of the object it purports to represent. What I would like to underscore is a reconception of the simulacrum such that in the discovery of the nonexistence of any fixed and firmly grounded original, the simulacrum may become an affirmation rather than a privation -- it may become something of value rather than simply indicate its distance from and inferiority with respect to the original. For this understanding of the simulacrum I am most indebted to Deleuze: see "Plato." For an excellent evaluation of the problem of the simulacrum as discussed by its principal theorists through the late 1990s, see Durham (1998: 7-17).

[2] Cf. Self (2002: 179-81, 189-204). Self characterizes narrative reflexivity as belonging specifically to modernism (179-80). He develops this notion extensively in connection with *Nashville* in "Resisting." Noting the modernist fragmentation of narrative causality and temporality, he views the sudden death in the spectacle at the end of *Nashville* as well situated in modernist notions: "This last scene depicts the initial vision of *Nashville* as the modernist Image described by Ezra Pound, 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time'" (Self is citing Frank 1963: 9). As I read the ending of *Nashville* (which I will say more about below), it distances the scene and by extension the movie from conceptual and affective content. It is essential to Altman's allegory in that it instantiates the complications in representing the conflict and trauma that the narrative arc of the film, the small stories that contribute to it, and numerous visual signals efface and thereby indicate by omission. It is broadly postmodern, according to one of Lyotard's famous definitions: "The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself" (1984: 81). It is important to note that Lyotard here finds the postmodern *in the modern*: I'm not convinced that an extended debate over what is

modern and what postmodern is worthwhile; but in any case, according to this definition, I situate Altman as postmodern.

[3] Without wishing to engage in the debates of the very extensive literature on trauma, I would simply like to reiterate one of the most basic lessons of trauma repetition: in his classical work on trauma, Freud (1961) points out that the repetition of a traumatic event, although it may be quite painful, offers the subject a sense of mastery over the event and then, eventually, a reduction to stillness.

[4] Elsewhere I have elaborated this notion of allegory in connection with early modern philosophy and literature. I understand allegory not as involving a finite series of signs that would be related to other signs according to a code, but rather as a system that disperses, mobilizes, and dislocates signs with respect to their strict determination. Such an allegory or allegorization is a discourse whose signs, rather than directly signifying something, point to another meaning that cannot be literally stated in the discourse; it emphasizes the distance rather than the link between one sign and another. Meaning becomes a matter of relations among signs rather than of a grounding in objects to which the signs might refer. What is allegorized is not available to language or apprehension except through the allegorizing discourse. See Melehy (2000: passim) and Melehy (2005: 99). Russell works with a related notion of allegory (1995: 13-15).

[5] Cf. Deleuze: "Physical, optical and auditory clichés and psychic clichés mutually feed on each other. In order for people to be able to bear themselves and the world, misery has to reach the inside of consciousness and the inside has to be like the outside . . . In *Nashville* the city locations are redoubled by the images to which they give rise -- photos, recordings, television -- and it is in an old song that the characters are finally brought together" (1986: 209). What Deleuze doesn't note here is that the final song, "It Don't Worry Me," is rather the simulacrum of an old song -- and hence kitsch, or the most banal of clichés.

[6] Peterson explains the operation of "fabricated authenticity" in country music, and how bluegrass was instituted as embodying a kind of genuine authenticity against the artificial authenticity of mainstream country. It was at once promoted as "old time," "roots" music and scorned by the mainstream country industry for its "hayseed" quality (Peterson, 1996: 213-14). See also Cantwell (2003: 193-99).

[7] Cf. Stuart: "Originally constructed from an exterior-grade plaster, the building's inevitable rapid deterioration demanded that it be completely rebuilt in 1920 -- this time from concrete. Now featuring a lavish, new-millennium facelift, the Parthenon one visits in Nashville is consequently a reconstruction of a facsimile of the realization of a Grecian fantasy. It is a dream four times removed: the perfect Hollywood movie set" (2000: 258). Completed when Socrates was a young man, the classical Parthenon is a monument to myth that was already being emptied of content in fifth-century Athens. It refers back to no fixed original but rather a series of antecedent signs in the various artifacts of Hellenic relations to divinity. Hence the Parthenon as image is instituted in the chain of repetitions of itself -- wish-fulfillments that the monument to Greek hegemony hadn't fallen into ruin -- in which we see a culmination in *Nashville*.

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