

## **MAKING SENSE OF A MULTI-PROTAGONIST FILM: AUDIENCE RESPONSE RESEARCH AND ROBERT ALTMAN'S *SHORT CUTS* (1993).<sup>1</sup>**

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Most audience response research in film studies attempts to overcome what it sees as a limitation of ideological criticism, namely, a tendency to locate the spectator at the centre of the analysis of the movies without making any reference to the opinions of actual spectators. The popularity that audience studies are now enjoying among film scholars shows the need to combine the traditional notion of the spectator as a passive and abstract homogeneous entity determined by the text with the notion of spectators as active and heterogeneous beings. Partaking of this enthusiasm for allowing the spectators themselves to speak instead of speaking for the spectators, I decided to follow the kind of audience response analysis undertaken by Judith Mayne (1993), Jackie Stacey (1994), Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes (1999, 2001, 2005) and Annette Kuhn (2002) among many others in order to respond accurately to this need and take into consideration the opinions of real spectators on a specific movie.

It seemed to me that audience response analysis was especially interesting in relation to multi-protagonist films because of the great differences between the narrative structures of these films and of those that we usually consider 'conventional' films. While conventional films tend to structure their plots as the trajectory of the goals and desires of a single protagonist or a couple, multi-protagonist films cast a wider net of characters without establishing such a strict narrative hierarchy between them. The absence of a main character is bound to directly affect audience

comprehension because of the great number of functions that are traditionally associated with the main character. In his definition of the classical Hollywood narrative system, Bordwell (1985) states that in a narrative “the most ‘specified’ character is usually the protagonist” to whom he ascribes not only the function of being the principal causal agent of the narrative but also those of being the target of any narrational restriction and especially the main object of audience identification (157). If the distinctive element of multi-protagonist films is precisely their lack of a main character: how do they work as far as causal agency, narrative unity, narrational restriction and, especially, spectator identification are concerned? Since a detailed analysis of all these elements would go far beyond the scope of this article, I will concentrate here on how spectators make sense of some of the strategies that these films use, namely the multiplicity of characters, the abandonment of conventional notions of causality and the restriction of audience involvement in the narrative.

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A film by Robert Altman was chosen as the object of research because he is, perhaps, the contemporary film director that comes to mind first when a film with a multiplicity of characters and plot lines is mentioned.<sup>2</sup> He is so frequently quoted as the “obvious model for [...] multi-stranded parallel storytelling” (Walters 2003: 46) that, by the time his film *The Company* (2003) was released, a ‘google’ search of the term ‘altmanesque’ elicited over a thousand mentions that systematically applied the term to any multi-protagonist film.<sup>3</sup> According to Trohler’s (2001) threefold classification of multi-protagonist films, *Short Cuts*, with its twenty-two characters arranged in nine different groups, is a mosaic film. Initially characters in mosaic films are linked only insofar as they happen to live in the same city at the same time, though eventually, as happens in *Short Cuts*, the characters’ paths cross and their stories become enmeshed, largely through coincidence.<sup>4</sup> As its initial credits show, *Short Cuts* consciously refuses to single out any particular character. Their names, which appear in the same size letters, fly over the screen apparently, and very self-consciously, at random. This refusal to single out a main character implies a radical departure from Bordwell’s (1985) account of classical narrative as based on a main goal-oriented character struggling to solve a clear-cut problem that ends with a clear resolution.

It emerged from the survey that watching a multi-protagonist film was not a new experience for most respondents. Most of them had seen other multi-protagonist movies such as *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), *Magnolia* (P.T. Anderson, 1999) or *Traffic* (Steven Soderbergh, 2000). As will be observed, the respondents’ knowledge of other multi-protagonist movies proved extremely useful for the research because some of their comments were not restricted to *Short Cuts* but could be applied to multi-protagonist films as a whole.

Twenty people with ages ranging from 18 to 65 years were provided with a copy of *Short Cuts* and a questionnaire on it (see Appendix 1).<sup>5</sup> Since I was more interested in the qualitative aspects of the research than in its statistical representativity, the respondents were selected according to what is usually known as a ‘snowball’ sampling method (Cea 1998: 180), that is, a method that uses known contacts to reach potential respondents. Such a partial sample can have no pretensions to being either statistically representative or completely random. However, the opinions of this group of respondents proved useful for my purposes: to explore the ways in which the lack of a main character may affect spectator comprehension of a movie.

Like most researchers using this type of approach, I was aware of the fact that spectator comments constitute a conscious and articulated response and, therefore, cannot be taken entirely at face value. They should not be taken as self-evident truths but as texts (Ang 1989: 11, Stacey 1994: 71-8, Austin 1999: 149-50). However, their status as texts should not be seen as a reason to dismiss them but rather as intrinsic to the method itself. In this particular case, the method chosen for analysing real spectators’ opinions provided me with somewhat biased spectators that were watching a film in order to fill out a questionnaire afterwards. They were aware that their answers were going to be analysed in close detail and sometimes tried to justify not giving what they regarded as the desirable answer. That was the case, for instance, in the question regarding whether they thought that the medfly pest—an element which, as will be seen later on, is constantly referred to in the film’s initial twelve-minute-long sequence—had any function or meaning within the film as a whole: “No lo he descifrado pero imagino que es importante” (respondent number 5), “no encuentro ninguna relación pero siempre puede tener un sentido para el director” (respondent number 8).<sup>6</sup>

One of the factors that has to be taken into account in order to analyse spectators’ views of a movie is the expectations that spectators bring to it even before they start watching it. Together with the stars and the movie’s title,<sup>7</sup> the director is one of the factors that may contribute to those expectations and, in the case of *Short Cuts*, it definitely did. The respondents that had seen other multi-protagonist films by Robert Altman such as *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), *Nashville* (1975), *The Player* (1992), *Prêt à Porter* (1994), *Dr. T and the Women* (2000) or *Gosford Park* (2001) were familiar with his unconventional way of narrating and knew what to expect from a Robert Altman movie.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, their comments on how they managed to make sense of the movie were sprinkled with references to the director. In replies from the respondents that were not familiar with Altman’s work, however, references to the difficulties posed by the formal structure of the film were frequent (around 25%). Respondent number 15, for instance, says: “Tuve problemas al principio de la película, por la diversidad de personajes y la historia que llevaba cada

uno de ellos. Más o menos, a mitad de película fue cuando tuve claro cada uno de los personajes”. It seems, then, that the great number of characters, the short time devoted to each story —the average scene in the film does not last more than a couple of minutes— and the intersections between the different stories —the fact that characters from one story are related either through coincidence, friendship or family ties to characters from another story— posed some problems to some spectators’ comprehension of the film.

Even some of those spectators who affirmed that they had no problem in following the characters’ paths through the film did mention that watching a multi-protagonist movie implied a greater deal of spectatorial activity: “La novedad de ver una película coral te mantiene más atento que si la película tuviese un argumento ‘normal’. Puede ser debido a que si en algún momento no prestas atención se te puede ‘escapar’ algo” (respondent number 8).

From what has just been said, it might be thought that although it took the spectators longer than usual to recognize the different characters and narrative lines, once they did —be it after the first half an hour or halfway through the film— their comprehension problems were over. However, some respondents said that they had problems in understanding either one of the stories —“no he entendido la historia de la violonchelista y su madre cantante” (respondent number 17)— or a specific event in one of them —“no he terminado de entender por qué el marido de la chica que tenía relaciones por teléfono mata a la chica de la bicicleta” (respondent number 16). Unlike the problems in recognizing the film’s twenty-two characters and nine narrative lines, these problems do not seem to be caused exclusively by the number of characters and fast editing but by other narrative strategies used in *Short Cuts* and in most multi-protagonist films: the substitution of serendipity for cause-and-effect and the restriction of spectator involvement in the narrative.

As Thompson (1999: 12) states, conventional films favour “unified narratives, which means that a cause should lead to an effect and that effect in turn should become a cause for another effect in an unbroken chain across the film”. Everything in a film should be motivated, whether in advance or in retrospect, for the benefit of unity and clarity. However, the cause-and-effect chain that defines conventional films does not apply to multi-protagonist films. Since “a perceiver of a narrative film comes armed and active to the task” (Bordwell 1985: 38-9), spectators may tend to use narrative schemata which define narrative events and unify them by principles of causality, among others. As the following comment shows, those spectators that tried to make sense of the film in accordance with traditional notions of causality were quickly disappointed. During the first twelve minutes of the film, the scenes used to introduce the characters are mixed with

shots of helicopters spreading the Los Angeles area with a product to kill the medfly: a pest which leaves harmless blemishes on fruit. Although this initial sequence is full of references to the spraying, the topic goes almost unmentioned for the rest of the film. When asked about the possible function or relationship of the medfly to the rest of the movie, most respondents thought that the spraying and the medfly did not have any function in the movie or that it was just a formal element which gave both local and temporal unity to the film by showing that all the characters live in the same city and that the action is taking place on the very same night. However, some respondents, looking for a conventional cause-and-effect relationship, declared that for a while they had taken for granted that the spraying was the cause of the characters' strange behaviour. Respondent number 15, for instance, says: "Al principio de la película pensaba que a causa de la fumigación de la mosca, las personas se comportaban de esa manera, se habían visto afectadas pero a lo largo de la película pienso que no tiene por qué influir, las personas se comportan así porque son así". Respondent number 17 makes a direct reference to the conventional notion of causality and considers that by subverting conventional notions of cause-and-effect the director is encouraging the viewer to make an error. His comment seems to imply that he was expecting a film of a completely different genre: "Creo que es una trampa para el espectador. En otras películas se usa el recurso de la fumigación para justificar los actos de los personajes pero, en este caso, los personajes no se ven influidos por la fumigación" (respondent number 17).

Unlike conventional films' heavy reliance on motivation for the sake of clarity, multi-protagonist films substitute serendipity for causality. To the detriment of conventional notions of motivation, they show an emphasis on fate and chance as the ruling agency behind characters' lives. If this refusal to use a traditional notion of causality may sometimes prompt spectators to establish false causal links when trying to make sense of a multi-protagonist film, these films' lack of a main character is also bound to have direct consequences in the spectators' response to it.

Although the term identification is widely used to account for spectator response to characters, the inaccuracy of the term, because of the different processes it involves, has already been noticed (Stacey 1994; Smith 1995). Murray Smith, for instance, breaks down the different processes through which spectators interact with characters into what he labels "empathic phenomena" and "the structure of sympathy". One of the processes he inscribes in the category of empathic phenomena is emotional simulation, that is, a voluntary process through which spectators, with little knowledge of a character, are able to project themselves into the characters' situation and make hypotheses about the emotions they are experiencing. While every narrative leaves room for this kind of simulation, there

are some films, such as *Short Cuts*, which invite the process much more than others.<sup>9</sup> Unlike empathic phenomena, the processes he inscribes into the structure of sympathy —recognition, alignment and allegiance— require comprehension of the narrative and the characters. Recognition is the stage at which spectators notice various traits of a character and arrange them into some kind of coherent personality. Alignment describes the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel. Allegiance occurs when spectators, having a reliable access to a character's state of mind and the context of the character's actions, make a moral evaluation of the character (1995: 82-5).

Emotional simulation and recognition are the only two processes that seem to be at work in *Short Cuts*. Spectators are able to recognize the characters —although, according to some of the spectators' comments this process is somehow compromised. Through a heavy reliance on external focalization and the absence of other devices that could help spectators to probe into the characters' minds (such as flashbacks or voice-overs) spectators are faced with opaque characters, which makes alignment impossible. Since allegiance relies on the spectators' access to a character's state of mind and the context of their actions, the spectators cannot ally themselves with the characters in *Short Cuts*. Apart from recognition, the only process at work is then the emotional simulation that allows spectators to make inferences about a character's state of mind. In conventional films, this process is subordinated to the overarching structure of sympathy because initial simulations are modified as the narrative develops. However, when watching a multi-protagonist film, spectators will usually have to make do with just emotional simulation because the film will not always give enough evidence to prove their hypotheses right or wrong.

The restriction of the ways in which spectators can interact with characters is also bound to affect how spectators make sense of the film. Most respondents managed to make sense of the film in spite of these restrictions and some thought that it was precisely because of the wider spectrum of characters and interpretations that the film offers that spectators can sometimes glimpse themselves in either one or another character (respondents number 12 and 17). Some respondents, however, were disappointed by these restrictions: “No he conectado con ninguno de los personajes, no me he sentido identificada ni me he metido en el papel de ninguno de ellos” (respondent number 11). This comment was in some cases made extensive to multi-protagonist films as a whole: “Las películas corales no te permiten conocer a fondo al personaje o a los protagonistas, no puedes llegar a identificarte ni sentir lo que están sintiendo ellos en ese momento” (respondent number 11). While these complaints seem to be a consequence of the spectators' inability to align themselves with characters, diverse spectator reactions to the same

character seem to account for the film's refusal to tell them with whom their sympathies should lie. Gene Shepard—the policeman played by Tim Robbins—is regarded by some respondents as the most contemptible character in the movie because of his constant cheating on his wife. A male respondent, however, does not feel contempt but pity towards him: “[El policía] crea un mundo que ya nadie cree pero que está lleno de humanidad. Es un pobre seductor al que sólo quiere su mujer porque también lo necesita. Suplica comprensión y atención” (respondent number 12). Some respondents saw the restriction of spectator engagement with the characters as a hindrance to getting into the narrative. Other respondents, however, regarded it as a key strategy for enjoying the film since it was precisely because of the restriction of audience involvement within the narrative that the film succeeded in bringing about lots of humorous moments in spite of the gloom that pervaded all the stories.

*Short Cuts* has sometimes been described as a “participatory text” (Balcom 1996), that is, one in which, “an active viewer can activate subcurrents present in the movie, put them together and receive a far richer text than simply letting the movie run its course”. It is precisely the willingness to engage in the active participation required by the film that determines respondents’ overall reaction towards the film. Respondents who, in general, showed a negative reaction towards the film usually related it to the lack of a conventional plot in terms of presentation, complicating action and resolution. Respondent number 11, for instance, is a good example: “Pienso que la vida de todas y cada una de esas personas carece de interés alguno. Pasa la película a la espera de que ocurra algo interesante y para mí ha sido una decepción porque nada de eso ha ocurrido”. It was precisely this lack of what is usually considered a conventional plot that prompted some respondents’ complaint that it was just a ‘descriptive’ movie because, actually, nothing happened in the film (respondents number 1 and 3).

Nevertheless, those respondents who, in general, showed a positive reaction towards the film seem to have a radically different view on this issue. When asked whether there was a lack of plot in the film, respondent number 12, for instance, answered: “No. En ningún momento, más bien todo lo contrario. Cuenta varias historias, y va saltando de una a otra con gran rapidez pero sin perder en ningún momento el hilo en cada historia. Todas las historias van avanzando y deseas saber más de cada una de ellas”. This view seems to be shared by respondent number 20 who affirmed that, due to the great number of things that happen in the film, each storyline is strong enough to be made into a film of its own. Another respondent suggested that, from his point of view, that apparent lack of plot was precisely the key to the film. As he puts it “es una película engañosa, parece que no pasa nada pero en realidad pasan muchas cosas” (respondent number 19).

As in previous questions, the respondents' comments regarding the film's plot were sometimes made extensive to multi-protagonist films as a whole. Some respondents complained that the apparent lack of plot in *Short Cuts* was a consequence of its nature as a multi-protagonist movie: "las películas corales no tratan de contar una historia, sólo muestran sus diferentes personajes" (respondent number 3). Other informants, however, did not hesitate to make a case for multi-protagonist movies: "es uno de los tipos de películas que más me gusta con muchos personajes, muchas situaciones. Refleja muy acertadamente el trajín diario y la cantidad de gente extraña y de cosas raras que suceden cada día" (respondent number 7). In contrast with those respondents who mentioned the lack of plot as a feature of multi-protagonist movies as a whole, others thought that the proliferation of characters added complexity to these films' plots: "un personaje principal da una visión mucho más limitada de los acontecimientos, ya que solamente proporciona un punto de vista. El hecho de que sean varios personajes los que comparten protagonismo aporta riqueza y complejidad a la trama" (respondent number 19).

This proliferation of characters and points of view was seen by some respondents as an alternative to the usually monolithic view of the world put forward by conventional films and their single protagonists. By offering a variety of reactions to a situation, multi-protagonist films allow for the inclusion of those alternative responses to the same event that are usually left out of movies with a single protagonist and a tight line of action (respondents number 12 and 17). It seems that, for these respondents, the use of a multi-protagonist narrative structure is not just a mere formal device but an ideological stance that tries to counteract what they regard as most films' usually one-sided view of events. Similarly, respondent number 19 considers that films with multiple protagonists try to emphasise the notion of community to the detriment of conventional films' reliance on the power of the individual. As he puts it: "este tipo de películas nos hablan de cómo, sin darnos cuenta, formamos una comunidad interrelacionada de formas insospechadas en la que el número de elementos que nos unen es mayor que el de los que nos separan; algo que parece contradecir la visión de la vida en las afueras y de la familia como microcosmos que ofrecen muchas películas". In this sense, as the constant connections between the characters and several formal devices in *Short Cuts* seem to imply,<sup>10</sup> these films call for an alternative to the typical portrait of city life in isolation; an issue that can be found in other multi-protagonist films such as *Thirteen Conversations About One Thing* (Jill Sprecher, 2001) or the more recent *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2005), in which a character refers to the isolation of city life by reading about a car crash as a way to regain the loss sense of interaction with other people.<sup>11</sup>

*Short Cuts*' lack of a conventional narrative structure —understood as order, disruption and restoration of the order— can be a source of annoyance for some



spectators and a source of pleasure for others. Boredom and irritation with the excessive length of the film, its lack of plot and its open ending are feelings that emerged from some of the questionnaires; enthusiasm, repeated viewings, the wish to see more movies like *Short Cuts* or to know more about the characters emerged from others. Similarly, the use of multiple protagonists may be seen as a device that hampers viewers' engagement with a narrative or as the element that favours spectators' involvement with it precisely because of the great variety of possibilities for identification that it allows for. The greater degree of spectatorial activity that watching a multi-protagonist film requires was also mentioned by some respondents. It seems, thus, that while some viewers may be willing to embrace these films' demand to make them change their ways of dealing with a narrative, it may result in a frustrating experience for others. The way in which spectators make sense of a multi-protagonist movie will be closely related to their expectations —their prior knowledge about the director or about this kind of movies— but, especially, to their willingness to put aside their conventional ways of engaging with films in order to make sense of a multi-protagonist movie. The heterogeneous nature of the respondents' views on some of the issues analysed here seems to foreground the problems of talking about spectatorial activity without taking real spectators into account. In spite of its limitations, audience response studies seem the only way to attempt to understand what audiences actually do when they watch a specific film. It should not be seen as a substitute but rather as a useful supplement to scholarly theorization and analysis.

## Appendix 1

### SHORT CUTS. VIDAS CRUZADAS (Robert Altman, 1993)

Edad: \_\_\_\_\_ Sexo: V M

Estudios realizados / en curso, ocupación: .....

1- Vidas Cruzadas es una película coral, es decir, una película en la que en lugar de un personaje y una historia principal aparecen muchos personajes y diferentes historias. ¿Conoces otras películas corales? SI NO

En caso afirmativo, menciona otras que hayas visto: .....  
.....

Esas películas que acabas de mencionar ¿te gustaron?

2- ¿Has tenido algún problema a la hora de seguir la película?

En caso afirmativo ¿por qué?, ¿en qué momento?

3- ¿Te ha parecido una película inconexa? SI NO

Si la respuesta anterior ha sido negativa ¿qué es lo que, desde tu punto de vista, da cohesión a la película?

4- ¿Has tenido la impresión de que en la película no pasaba nada, es decir, de que faltaba argumento? Intenta justificar tu respuesta.

5- Al principio de la película aparecen unos helicópteros fumigando contra una plaga llamada “mosca de la fruta”. ¿Crees que la mosca de la fruta tiene algún sentido o función dentro de la película? ¿Por qué?

6- Al principio también aparece uno de los personajes, Tess, la cantante de jazz, cantando una canción que dice “Yesterday you owned the world and the next day the world owns you. Cause you’re a prisoner, and I’m a prisoner, I am a prisoner of life” (Un día posees el mundo y al día siguiente el mundo te posee a ti. Porque tú eres un prisionero, y yo soy un prisionero, un prisionero de la vida). ¿Crees que la letra de la canción tiene algún sentido dentro de la película? ¿Por qué?

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7- ¿Qué personaje(s) te ha(n) gustado más? ¿Cuál(es) te han parecido más anti-páticos? ¿Por qué?

8- ¿Qué visión da la película de las relaciones familiares?

¿Y de las relaciones de pareja?

¿Qué te parece que la película presente las relaciones de ese modo?

9- Algunos dicen que las películas corales ofrecen una representación más fiel de la realidad que las películas que tienen uno o dos protagonistas principales que hacen algo o a los que les pasa algo. ¿Estás de acuerdo con esta afirmación?

¿Por qué?

10- En Francia titularon a esta película *Los Americanos*. ¿Te parece un título apropiado? ¿Por qué?

11- El título original de la película *Short Cuts* puede significar “atajos” o “trozos pequeños”. *Short Cuts* (US)/ *Vidas Cruzadas* (España)/ *Los Americanos* (Francia): ¿qué título te parece más apropiado?

¿Crees que el título puede afectar la forma de ver la película? ¿Por qué?

12- ¿Te ha gustado la película?

13- ¿Te ha parecido divertida?

¿Recuerdas algún momento especialmente divertido?

Si la respuesta es afirmativa, menciónalo y explica por qué te ha parecido divertido.

14- ¿Te ha parecido demasiado larga?

15- ¿Hay algo más que quieras comentar?

## Notas

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<sup>2</sup>. The number of Robert Altman's films, including his latest *The Company* (2003), to make use of a multi-protagonist narrative structure amounts to fourteen out of the thirty-two which he has directed —films made for television not included.

<sup>3</sup>. There is more to 'altmanesque' than multiplicity of characters and plot lines but this narrative structure is usually what is referred to when the adjective is used.

<sup>4</sup>. As for the other categories, collective films feature a group of characters, usually not individualised in the course of the narrative, sharing a common goal, and ensemble films feature a single large group such as a family or a group of friends whose members, usually linked spatially to some central meeting place, get involved in different storylines (Troehler 2001).

<sup>5</sup>. Due to the wide variety of issues that the questionnaire attempts to cover, only the questions dealing with the aforementioned issues will be analysed here.

<sup>6</sup>. Since the research was conducted in Spanish I have decided not to translate the respondents' answers when

quoted literally. The best translation could never do justice to the colourful nature of some of the comments.

<sup>7</sup>. Since the title is usually the first piece of information that spectators have about a movie, it is bound to be one of the elements that helps create those expectations. Some respondents regarded a movie title as a key element not only in order to bring about expectations about what a movie is like but also in order to determine whether they want to see the movie or not. However, a great number of respondents (almost 50%) acknowledged that they did not pay any attention to the title —which is extremely surprising when you consider how much marketing work lies behind a title. The reason most frequently adduced was that Spanish titles are usually radically different from the original ones and, therefore, a title should neither raise expectations about a movie nor determine whether you wanted to see it or not.

<sup>8</sup>. Though only *Nashville* and *Prêt à Porter* would fit into Troehler's category of mosaic multi-protagonist films —the rest would be ensembles— they all participate in some of the conventions of the multi-protagonist film genre such as the use of loose causal relationships and, therefore, proved crucial in raising spectators' expectations when watching *Short Cuts*.

<sup>9</sup>. Classical films, for instance, do not leave much room for this process. Clarity

being their main aim, they tend to be redundantly informative and usually try to leave no doubt about a character's feelings.

<sup>10</sup>This sense of interconnectedness between apparently isolated characters is constantly reinforced through formal elements—from the film's title to the matches-on-action between different storylines and to the last shot of the film in which a panoramic view

of the city gives way to a bird eye's view of a Los Angeles map in which separate homes and separate lives become linked through an intricate web of avenues, roads and highways.

<sup>11</sup>“In L.A. nobody touches you. We are always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss this touch so much that we crash into each other just so we can feel something”.

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