Closer to Home: Carver versus Altman

by Martin Scofield

I want to compare Robert Altman's film *Short Cuts* with some of the stories by Raymond Carver on which the film is based. My purpose is not to test the fidelity of the film to the stories: a film has its own kind of vision, and a director should be free to mold his material in whatever way he thinks fit. Some films of literary works may succeed by virtue of the way they reproduce some of the qualities of those works in another medium: one thinks, for instance, of the Merchant/Ivory films of novels by Henry James and E. M. Forster. But it is just as possible for a director simply to use the literary work as a starting point for his own creation. However, once that has been done, it seems reasonable to ask: how does the vision of the film compare with that of the literary work? Film has immense popular prestige, and it is likely that many more people will see the film than will read the stories. Should this be a matter for complacency or regret?

These questions are complicated in the case of Altman and Carver by the fact that Altman has gone to some lengths to emphasize the closeness of the connection between the film and the stories. Carver's name features prominently in the credits for the film; an edition of the nine stories and the poem has been published by Harvill under the title *Short Cuts* and with an introduction by Altman; and the screenplay of the film, by Altman and co-writer Frank Barhydt, has been published by Capra Press with an introduction by Carver's widow, the writer Tess Gallagher. Both the introductions, while noting the substantial changes Altman has made to Carver and the subtle weaving of his 10 quite separate pieces into a single whole, stress the inspiration of Carver's work and the indebtedness of the film to the stories. It seems fair then, after giving the film its due as an outstanding piece of filmmaking, to ask what has Altman added and what has he lost? What kind of insight do the two auteurs have into human behavior, what kind of view of life do they embody; and ultimately, what is the relative value for our culture and our ways of thinking of the two works and the two kinds of vision?

---

1The stories are: "Neighbors"; "They're Not Your Husband"; "Vitamins"; "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?"; "So Much Water So Close to Home"; "A Small, Good Thing"; "Jerry and Molly and Sam"; "Collectors"; "Tell the Women We're Going"; and one prose poem, "Lemonade." The 10 pieces are published in *Short Cuts*.


387
Altman's is a big film; long, multifarious, fast-moving; visually packed, loud with noises, voices, music. On the big screen, and with the enveloping stereophonic sound, it impacts on the senses. There is a lot of close-up and medium close-up: not only of faces but of bodies and objects (helicopters in the opening sequence, police motorcycle, cars, kitchen-equipment, all the dense materiality of the American big city, here the suburbs of Los Angeles). Noises, large and small, are registered with larger than life sonority. The rhythmic blood-beat of helicopter blades (you almost feel the wind), the deep-throated roar or growl of a motorcycle, the crunch of boots on gravel, a dog barking, the chink of motorcycle keys falling on a table. As in Altman's Nashville (1975), there is a sense of pressure, of turmoil, of many lives and energies pursuing their own paths and then intersecting, or colliding, bumping off each other. This sense of packed action, of material life, is one of the things that gives this film its impact and exhilaration.

The film begins with the helicopter behind the credit titles, which themselves slide onto the screen in vivid reds and blues like sideways floating planes, and then fade like radar images. It's almost an echo, as one reviewer pointed out, of the opening of Apocalypse Now (1979), Coppola's film about Vietnam: and this feeling will persist and be reaffirmed at the end of Altman's film. The echo is also ironic: these choppers are not, ostensibly, hostile but merely spraying the thousands of LA gardens with Medfly insecticide. But the feeling of threat is still there; social, municipal power inflicted for the good of citizens whether they, individually, like it or not.

Structurally, the sequence serves to give a sense of a common context, to unite the multiple threads of the different lives, different situations, different plots, which are going to be loosely bound together in the film. There is the motorcycle cop and his family, the wife he's cheating on and their three small children and the dog; the swimming-pool cleaner whose wife looks after their baby and toddler while running a telephone sex-line from their apartment; the night-club singer and her cello-playing daughter in her early twenties (the one story in the film not based on Carver); the painter of female nudes and her doctor husband; the young man doing a course in horror-movie make-up, and his wife; the TV commentator and his nice Southern wife and their eight-year-old son; the café waitress and her drunken limo-driver husband; the three men in the café who are going off on a fishing trip; the helicopter pilot whose wife is the cop's mistress.

Generically, it will be clear, the film is related to soap-opera, or, more distantly, to those American disaster-movies (Airport, Towering Inferno) where many different characters and situations are brought together by a single all-enveloping crisis. But Altman transforms the genre. Instead of the plodding connections of the single-location (street or bar or hospital) of the soap-opera, or the easy linking of one group to the next via the single crisis,
the characters in *Short Cuts* are related by chance contacts of a multitude of
different kinds, governed and often hampered or injured, but also energized,
by chance events and associations. The café waitress, driving to work, knocks
down the TV presenter’s son who is on his way to school. The waitress’s
husband stops at the restaurant for coffee and is half-offended, half-stimula-
ted by witnessing the three fishermen talking coarsely about his wife’s sexual
attractions. The young doctor, calm, efficient and humane at his hospital,
treating the boy in a coma, is made shouting, resentful and uncompre-
hending at home by his wife’s revelation of her infidelity three years before, a
revelation that comes just before the arrival for a barbecue supper of two
friends, one of the fishermen and his wife. The latter are also in unresolved
marital conflict, in the aftermath of another of the film’s crises: the fishing
trip on which the three men discover the naked body of a murdered young
woman in the river, but don’t report it until their three days of fishing are
done.

As will be apparent from this short description of the “plot” or plots,
there is a feeling of near-confusion in the film, steering close to letting the
audience lose the threads but never quite doing so; “casually artful” as
Michael Wood put it, “rather than just artful and casual.” As a piece of filmic
construction it is very clever, and a great deal of our pleasure comes from our
perception of this. One casually artful moment comes when the wife of the
horror make-up student goes to pick up photos of herself made-up as a bat-
tered and then murdered wife that her husband has taken (partly as practice,
partly as an unpleasant game). She arrives at the photo-kiosk at the same time
as one of the fisherman is picking up his fishing photos, which include photos
of the murdered girl they found. The photos get mixed up and both parties
are horrified by what they see: they hand them back to each other without a
word but with some (slightly overdone) appalled looks, and we see both
parties taking the other’s car number.

The film also raises questions about the relation between our experiences
of art and our experiences of life. It raises them wittily and nonchalantly, but
how far it clarifies them is another matter. A conversation between the doctor
and his painter wife about her painting of nudes (He: “You know scientifi-
cally speaking, Marian, there’s no such thing as beyond natural color”) cuts
to a shot of the young woman’s pale naked body in the river. In a later scene,
one of the fishermen takes a photo of her. Later still, the doctor, looking at a
nude painting of his wife’s sister (also the cycle cop’s wife), says: “Why are
they always naked? Why does naked make it art?” (*Screenplay* 106). The
make-up student makes up his wife as a battered victim; he also talks to his
friend the pool cleaner on the phone about a high-school girl—actually a
creation of his fantasy—for whom he has done body make-up. At the other
end of the line the pool cleaner watches a girl (the cello-player) stripping
naked to jump into the pool next door.
Questions are, as it were, alluded to here about the difference between artistic nudity and real nakedness; between the kind of horror we feel at images in horror films and our real horror at images of violence and mutilation in real life; between private sexual fantasy and "public" voyeurism. But the questions are merely alluded to with a knowing casualness and never explored. What is the difference, aesthetically and morally, between the painting of a nude and the half-nudity of the doctor's wife in the scene where she berates him about his infidelity, or again between these and the nakedness of the dead girl in the river (either from the point of view of the audience or from that of the characters in the film)? What is the relation between our (the audience's) shock of seeing horribly mutilated and disfigured heads, and then our modified reaction when we see that these are, in the "real" world of the film, merely human models in a make-up class. One answer might be that a serious aesthetic treatment of human sexuality or vulnerability or suffering can never be separated from our moral reaction to these things in real life, and that the response to criticism of brutal special effects of "It's only a game" or "It's not real for heaven's sake" is at best beside the real point and at worst disingenuous. But Altman never presses his clever and thought-provoking juxtapositions to the point of moral analysis and definition. The "buzz" he gets (and, it has to be admitted, conveys) from the oddity and cleverness of his comic connections precludes a more thoughtful rendering of them.

One of the most ingenious pieces of motif-connecting in the film is that of water and fishing, which draws on Carver's "So Much Water So Close to Home." The helicopters in the opening sequences spray the suburbs with a kind of disinfectant (or might it be carcinogenic?) rain. The pool cleaner reassures the jazz singer that it will not be dangerous to swim in her pool ("Water's probably the safest place to be" [31]). The make-up student's wife is mesmerized by the fish (lion-fish, and goldfish who are fed to the lion-fish) in their neighbor's apartment. The three men on the fishing trip, putting out of their minds the body of the girl in the river, catch a big haul of trout. One of them (the clown's husband) brings the trout to the barbecue party at the doctor and painter's house; the doctor proceeds to burn it on the barbecue by miscalculating the cooking-time. When the earthquake happens the two barbecue couples are in the Jacuzzi. So much water so close to home: but the connections remain on the surface.

That is to say, Altman is undeniably entertaining and exhilarating to watch: the connections give a sense of a world dominated by chance and serendipity, and we are buoyed up by our sense of the director's and screenplay writer's ability to give us simultaneously the sense of randomness and relationship. But the problems start when we ask ourselves what kind of sensations we are being made to feel, and what kind of perspective we are finally being given. The postmodern jumble of interconnecting motifs (is
there a pattern in the carpet, or is it just carpet?) give ample material for the retrospective critic to discover, or make up, his own patterns, and no doubt critics will be doing this for some time to come. But how far do the cleverness and exhilaration satisfy, and what, if any, is the feeling beneath that? “A dazzlingly intricate and riveting portrait of America approaching a moral millennium,” wrote Jack Kroll in *Newsweek*. But an earthquake is not a moral millennium, nor can you portray a moral millennium without a clear sense of the moral system that the idea of millennium crowns. “It’s a great ocean of a movie,” writes Jonathan Demme, “with vast calms, raging waves, everything. It can make you laugh so hard and then break your heart.” True enough. But what can we salvage from this emotional sea-storm and subsequent breakage? Also, do the ironies of the film amount merely to a cleverly intersecting multitude of “Life’s Little Ironies” (to borrow the title of one of Hardy’s volumes of tales and sketches), ironies that make us smile in a slightly sickly way, perhaps with a half groan as we simultaneously register the point and the fact that we are being made to register the point, and the uncertainty about how much the point really means in the end?

The prevailing mood of the film is a kind of buoyant disenchantedness, and energetic delight in survival and the life of the big city and a wry, rueful but never fully engaged sense of individual calamity and tragedy. We never have time to dwell on, really to take in, the more tragic elements, or the glimpses of more serious values. The death of the little boy knocked down by the car is harrowing, but we feel uncomfortable at the way it is intercut with all the other material, the speed with which it has to be treated, and the way its tragedy is blunted and ironized by the comic but painful involvement of the boy’s grandfather (a character added to Carver’s story), who has not seen his successful son for years, and who turns up full of crass apology and self-absorption. The last shot of the scene in which the boy dies is of the grandfather walking off without staying to commiserate with his son and daughter-in-law. The irony and bitterness of that blunts the tragedy: the grandfather does not deserve this attention in the context.

One final detail about the film will serve as my transition to Carver’s stories. At the beginning of the scene in which the helicopter pilot is finishing off cutting up the furniture in his house with an electric chainsaw (as a revenge on his unfaithful wife) the television is on in the ravaged living-room. Howard Finnigan, the TV commentator and father of the boy who is later to die, is presenting an editorial on the subject of “Tenderness,” though we scarcely notice this in the context of the pilot’s violence (indeed, this viewer at any rate missed it altogether and only picked it up reading the screenplay). The text of his editorial is taken, virtually verbatim, from the first three

---

2See Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White*, cited by Lodge (12).
paragraphs (10 lines or so in the screenplay) of Carver’s “Meditation on a Line from Saint Teresa” (No Heroics Please 223–25). The line from Saint Teresa, quoted twice, is: “Words lead to deeds . . . they prepare the soul, make it ready, and move it to tenderness.” Carver’s comment, spoken by the TV commentator in the film, runs: “There is clarity and beauty in that thought expressed in just this way. There is also something a little foreign in this sentiment coming to our attention in a time certainly less openly supportive of the important connection between what we say and what we do” (Screenplay 100). To work this bit of Carver in is clever, but the irony of the context of the violent destruction, if we take the passage in, is blatant to the point of crudity. But we hardly do take it in. The quiet profundity of the meditation gets lost in the distraction of modern life (we take that point); but the meditation also gets lost in the detached, ironic stance of the film. It cannot act as any kind of moral center in our experience of the film, even if we notice it (and it’s doubtful if many in the audience will). The throwaway use of this serious passage comes very close to cynicism. And this, one has to say, is true of the vision of the film as a whole. Nothing is dwelt on; none of the human predicaments in the film is given full respect and consideration.

2

In Raymond Carver’s stories, the writer’s respect and consideration for his characters are among the things we most value. Carver is very close to his protagonists: we know that several of the stories have biographical origins, and even where this is not the case, Carver empathizes closely with his central figures, or at the very least puts himself on a level with them. Carver was from a poor background: his father was a construction laborer then a saw filer; his mother worked as a waitress and clerk. He was closer in background, then, to characters like Doreen and Earl Piggott (the waitress and limo-driver) in the film than to Howard and Ann Finnigan (the TV editor and his wife). Nearly all his stories focus on working-class characters—though it should be said that we are often hardly aware of class, or even very prominently of the protagonists’ jobs (where they have any). The stories are set mainly in the Pacific Northwest: Oregon, Washington State, Northern California, in rural areas, small towns or middle-sized cities. (In choosing Los Angeles as his setting, even if only the downtown suburbs of Downey, Watts, Compton, Pomona and Glendale, Altman was going at once for a more metropolitan and sophisticated—certainly richer—locale.)

3The piece was an untitled address at a graduation ceremony at the University of Hartford, Connecticut, on 15 May 1988; according to the editor it was Carver’s last-written work of prose. This source, unlike that of the nine stories and the poem, is not mentioned in the published screenplay or in Altman’s introduction to the volume of stories Short Cuts.
But more important than closeness to class and background (for Altman is doubtless closer to Los Angeles too) is Carver’s human closeness to what his characters experience. Where he explores tragedy or pain he looks at it unflinchingly; where he follows his characters through to some kind of reconciliation or renewal of hope he does so scrupulously, giving the process due weight. The story “So Much Water So Close to Home”\(^4\) (the fishing incident story), is narrated by the wife: the experience we follow is primarily hers, though we also get a sense through her of the changes it brings about in her husband; her concern for him is one of the things that gives the story its humanity. In the film, we get the picture in fragments, from the eye of the omniscient “auteur,” and the wife’s awareness is focused on after we have seen the story of the fishing encounter. The awareness is more exclusively sexual, too, since the husband tells her about the incident immediately after they have made love on his first night home, and her unease is registered by her going to the bathroom to wash. Carver’s story begins \textit{in medias res} with the wife and husband talking the next day and we can gauge the essence of the wife’s moral reaction by the second page (“That’s the point,” I say. “She is dead. But don’t you see? She needed help” [\textit{Fires} 186]). Then around the third page we go back: the wife tells the whole story, the fishing trip, how her husband came back and they made love, how her husband showed her the story in the newspaper next morning at breakfast. The presentation is less abrupt and sensational, with the focus on the wife trying to come to terms with what has happened and the angry, uncomfortable, dawning awareness of the man. “So much water so close to home, why did he have to go miles away to fish?” (191) is what the wife thinks when they go for a drive and they stop beside a pond, and as well as the banal thought, the image suggests an underthought of water as representing the wild and unpredictable. When the wife drives the 117 miles to the dead girl’s funeral, she is bothered by a truck driver who seems to her threatening, and waiting in a dirt road off the shoulder she hears “the river somewhere down below the trees” (200). In the earlier version of the story (the one reprinted in the \textit{Short Cuts} collection of the nine stories and the poem) the emphasis at the close is the conflict between resignation and anger as she talks to her husband on the phone: “He says something else and I listen and nod slowly. I feel sleepy. Then I wake up and say, ‘For God’s sake Stuart she was only a child’” (204). The later version ends with the two about to make love, and the image of water returns as a kind of unstated metaphor for desire and the way it blots out consciousness: “He says something else. But I don’t need to listen. I can’t hear a thing with so much water going. / ‘That’s right,’ I say, finishing the buttons myself. ‘Before Dean [their son] comes. Hurry’” (\textit{Stories} 240). Both these endings,

\(^4\)The version of the story reprinted in \textit{Short Cuts} is that published in \textit{Fires}. 
in opposing ways, mark the conflict between conscience and habit, guilt and need, spiritual awareness and the instinct of survival. In the film, on the other hand, the wife’s disgust dwindles merely to petulance and contempt (in the film the man is also out of work). There is no sense of changing awareness in the man, and the story is dissipated as the couple get caught up in another strand of the plot, the barbecue with the doctor and his wife the painter.

The story “A Small, Good Thing” is the one that Altman sticks closest to in the film, but the nature of the film is such that he cannot focus his attention on it fully. Carver, by contrast, can and does. Altman also achieves a successfully low-key opening to the story (the casualness of the accident, the touching determination of the boy to walk home—Altman indeed increases this). But in the hospital scenes the film is difficult to distinguish from the polished but callous intermingling of plots of the British television series *Casualty*. The boy’s unexpected death is, of course, harrowing in both versions (as done with the barest degree of competence, it could not but be); but in Carver it is devastating. And whereas Altman diverts our attention with the painful comedy of the grandfather—well-done but intrusive, out of place, aesthetically embarrassing as well as about embarrassment—Carver keeps our attention on the bereaved couple, particularly the feelings of the mother:

Ann was aware of how slowly, almost reluctantly, she moved her feet. It seemed to her that Dr. Francis was making them leave when she felt they should stay, when it would be more the right thing to do to stay. She gazed out into the parking lot and then turned around and looked back at the front of the hospital. She began shaking her head. “No, no,” she said. “I can’t leave him here, no.” She heard herself say that and thought how unfair it was that the only words that came out were the sort of words used on TV shows where people were stunned by violent or sudden deaths. She wanted her words to be her own. (346)

This is a typical example of Carver’s rendering of moment-to-moment feeling and action and the sincerity of his concern for his characters’ own concern with sincerity. It may be that there is a kind of sincerity too in Altman’s avoidance of the parents’ immediate reactions to the death: the thing is too difficult to do well, to distinguish from those “TV shows.” But the result feels more like insensitivity: as we watch (and as we look back), we feel cheated of a proper response, our need to follow the thing through and to witness the grief. And instead we get the easier, cleverer, irrelevant irony of the grandfather walking away.5

5It has been suggested to me that Altman’s addition of the grandfather brings out an element latent in Carver: the possibility that the boy’s father has also been self-absorbed and even negligent. But I confess I do not find any hint of this in the story,
The confrontation with the baker, the closing scene in Carver’s story, also needs time to be worked through. In Altman, the scene is rushed: the parents’ anger looms much larger than the reconciliation; the baker does not get to talk about himself as he does indirectly in Carver (a kind of confession). His bringing out the rolls or cakes gets an incredulous laugh from the audience; and, a few seconds later, the whole moment is disrupted by the earthquake. The story’s attempt to work through the grief and pain of the tragedy to some kind of human solidarity and comfort is sacrificed to the film’s need for a common denouement, the easy gesture toward a common fate, the *deus ex machina* of an impersonal Nature overriding “petty” human affairs. (Again there are analogies with the more ponderous and tendentious side of Hardy’s imagination.) But Carver’s stories imply a world where human tragedy, however private, is greater than earthquakes, even when earthquakes are the cause of tragedy.

3

The earthquake in the film, of course, as the waitress says, “Wasn’t The Big One,” and the one “fatality” at the end is not caused by it. Altman’s “Apocalypse” is an ironic one: it does not take itself seriously as a “moral Apocalypse” (and a good thing too)—though it may play equivocally with a hint of that. It has not, at any rate, shown any consistent grounds, or desire, for an overall moral condemnation of its society. And this is good too, since it does not have the authority for that. The ending is upbeat in a fairly easy way. In the closing moments of the film, the helicopter pilot (“Stormy” Weathers) is being interviewed on the TV screen at the barbecue party apartment. “It is a beautiful day, the kind of day every Angelino says to himself or herself just how lucky he or she is to be living in LA” (*Screenplay* 131). A few seconds later the barbecue party drinks a Tequila toast to lemonade, as the camera pans across the patio to a sweeping panorama of Los Angeles. And that just about sums it up. The horrific, unexpected murder of the girl trail-biker in a scene a few moments earlier is left unpursued, possibly never to be discovered: the newsman reports it as a possible earthquake fatality. But how lucky the rest of them are to be living in LA.

The film’s treatment of the infidelity of the doctor’s wife’s, the murder and the ending, prompt comparison with Carver’s handling of these things.

nor any real support for the idea that the hospital doctors are casual and uncaring. It seems to me that the painfulness of the hospital episodes in Carver is actually increased by the fact that the doctors are as helpful and concerned as they could be expected to be: their well-meaning simply intensifies the sense of helplessness. In Altman, however, the role of the main doctor (Ralph Wyman) in these scenes is played down, his behavior restricted to a cool, if sympathetic, efficiency; and there is no meeting (as there is in Carver) between the parents and the doctor after the boy’s death.
In “Will you Please Be Quiet, Please?” (a characteristic title, picking up a phrase that nicely reveals the protagonist’s uncertain grasp of a polite authority), the teacher whose wife was unfaithful “three or four” years before fantasizes about violence but does not actually use it. In the story, it is his wife who raises the subject of the party where she went off with another man (suggesting her underlying sense of guilt, an unconscious need to confess perhaps) whereas in the film the doctor raises the subject. In the film, the wife’s final confession is delivered when she is naked from the waist down (having spilled some wine on her skirt)—another accident motif, easy irony, and cannily aimed at audience amusement or titillation, but detracting from the seriousness of the moment. In the film, too, the wife is simply embarrassed but curt (“I wish it hadn’t happened, but it did” [110]). In the story, she is frightened at her husband’s anger and pleads for forgiveness. In the film the confrontation reaches no conclusion, interrupted by the fact that the guests are coming, and the husband is merely left sarcastically needling his wife during the game of Jeopardy (“Are you cheating, Ralph?” “No, Marian, you cheat, remember?” [116]). In the story the husband goes out, goes to a bar, joins a card-game for a while, walks about the town. He gets mugged by two men, but it scarcely interrupts his preoccupation with the adultery. He gets home and sees his wife sleeping:

He stared. What, after all, should he do? Take his things and leave? Go to a hotel? Make certain arrangements? How should a man act, given these circumstances? He understood things now were to be done. He did not understand what things now were to be done. The house was very quiet. (*Stories* 180)

Carver gives us, simply, the full moral and emotional issue. Whereas Altman’s moments of greatest intensity are characteristically noisy, Carver’s are quiet. He also has a sense of the power of sexual feeling to help heal an emotional crisis; whereas with Altman, sexuality (except perhaps in the case of the drunken reconciliation of the waitress and limo-driver) is only a cause of division. In the film, the wife, immediately after the confrontation, flirts with the other husband. The story ends with the wife coming to her husband as he is in bed:

He tensed at her fingers, and then he let go a little. It was easier to let go a little. Her hand moved over his hip and over his stomach and she was pressing her body over his now and moving over him and back and forth over him. He held himself, he later considered, as long as he could. And then he turned to her. He turned and turned in what might have been a stupendous sleep, and he was still turning, marvelling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him. (182)
The difference is between a sardonic irony about social mores and a deep sense of wonder at the processes of human feeling.

Tess Gallagher makes the interesting point in her Introduction to the screenplay of *Short Cuts* that Altman’s additions and changes do redress one point of imbalance in Carver (12). Writing when he did he was inclined to stress the sensitivity of women and the incomprehension of men in the emotional struggles between the two. And it is true that a number of his best stories are narrated by women. In contrast, Altman’s film points up the way in which female complicity in male violence and perversion (as with the wife who runs the telephone sex-line) can contribute to that violence and perversion. The waywardness in female sexuality is certainly there too in “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please,” but not, it is true, in many other of Carver’s stories. Yet in “Tell the Women We’re Going,” the naïve irresponsibility of the girls and their ambiguous attitude to the men (“They were standing there and looking down. / ‘What’re you guys following us for?’ the brunette called down”) is felt to play its part in the catastrophe (226). On balance, though, maybe Altman has the edge here. This story of Carver’s seems to me one of the least successful: the violence of Jerry finds no motivation in the preceding story even when we look back over it. Altman provides a psychological context in the pool cleaner’s incomprehension and moral obtuseness in the face of his wife’s self-prostitution. But, even so, there is no time to follow it through.

Finally, *respite finem* is good aesthetic as well as moral advice, and I will close with a brief consideration of Carver’s endings. The horror of the murder by the pool cleaner in the film is, as I’ve said, immediately swallowed up in the larger but more trivial drama of the earthquake. The film is allowed to end on a kind of *coup-de-cinéma* that ends all the stories but resolves none of them. One of Carver’s subtlest endings is that to the story “Jerry and Molly and Sam” (the story that provides the basis for the policeman’s story in the film). The comedy of the story in the film is all external: the motorcycle cop harassed by his children and their dog; his wife’s tough, cynical amusement at his lies about where he’s going when he goes to see his mistress; his encounter with the professional clown (“I’ll let you go with a warning this time, ma’am. You were driving too slow. Just as dangerous as driving too fast” [Screenplay 52]); riding off with the dog in his motorcycle pannier; shouting through his police bullhorn during the earthquake. In the story we are inside the protagonist’s mind from the first sentence: “As Al saw it there was only one solution. He had to get rid of the dog without Betty or the kids

---

Tess Gallagher has some good insights into how Altman has recreated the stories in terms of film, but the overall tenor of her account is more positive toward the film than my own.
finding out about it" (Stories 115). We see the comic workings of his conscientious scruples—the way the more trivial ones get in the way of the bigger ones, and the way nevertheless a sense of decency and a more traditional moral language sticks somewhere at the back of his mind too:

He could never get used to the lying. Besides, he hated to use what little reserve he might have left with Betty by telling her a lie for something different from what she suspected. A wasted lie, so to speak. But he could not tell her the truth, could not say he was not going drinking, was not going calling on somebody, was instead going to do away with the goddam dog and thus take the first step toward setting his house in order. (116-17)

He is an airplane engineer with a drink problem, threatened with layoff—an altogether less glamorous figure than the motorcycle cop in the film. In his decision "to get rid of the dog" and his remorse after doing so, we feel both the comedy of things getting out of proportion and the moral struggle that is genuinely there:

He saw his whole life a ruin from here on in. If he lived another fifty years—hardly likely—he felt he'd never get over it, abandoning the dog. He felt he was finished if he didn't find the dog. A man who would get rid of a little dog wasn't worth a damn. That kind of man would do anything, would stop at nothing. (124)

In the story, as in the film, the man finds the dog. But the film ends the story with a shot of the man and his family putting their arms around each other after the earthquake: touching but conventional. Carver's story ends at a point just before the one we expect. The man finds the dog but the story ends before he actually catches it:

The dog stopped when she saw him. She raised her head. He sat down on his heels, reaching out his arm, waiting. They looked at each other. She moved her tail in greeting. She lay down with her head between her front legs and regarded him. He waited. She got up. She went round the fence and out of sight.

He sat there. He thought he didn't feel so bad all things considered. The world was full of dogs. There were dogs and there were dogs. Some dogs you just couldn't do anything with. (125)

The penultimate sentence lightly recalls a short passage earlier in the story when Al remembers the Irish setter he had as a boy (the "Sam" of the title), and of "autumns when he'd hunt pheasants behind Sam, the setter's flashing red coat a beacon through cornfields and alfalfa meadows where the boy that he was and the dog that he had would both run like mad" (119). The dog he is looking for now is different, just as the man is different from the boy. By stopping the story just before its plot conclusion Carver foils us of the feeling
of relief at things tied up the conventional happy ending. Instead, he leaves us with the sense that events are still in mid-flow, but that the man has discovered things about his life that are both disillusioning and strengthening.

Carver's art is one of quiet simplicity, but under the plain surface and the calm flow of the prose there are currents and eddies that pull at the feelings and thoughts like a river tugging at a fishing line. The flow of Altman's film is racy and exhilarating, and the experience of watching it is more like white-water rafting. There are lots of bumps and thrills and painful moments, but the river is shallower and not so close to home.

WORKS CITED


