

The Player (1992)

“suspense/laughter/violence/hope/heart/nudity/sex/happy endings”

--Griffin Mill, describing the elements in the pictures he produces

Major Credits:

Director: Robert Altman

Screenplay: Michael Tolkin, based on his novel of the same title

Cast: Tim Robbins (Griffin Mill), Greta Scacchi (June Gudmundsdottir), Fred Ward (Walter), Whoopi Goldberg (Detective Susan Avery), Peter Gallagher (Larry Levy), Cynthia Stevenson (Bonnie Sherow), Dean Stockwell (Andy Civella), Richard E. Grant (Tom Oakley), Lyle Lovett (Detective DeLongpre)

Background:

The Player represented a resounding comeback for Altman, a veteran of more than twenty-five feature films by 1992 who had enjoyed tremendous critical and commercial success in the 1970s with such hits as *M*A*S*H* (1970), *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), and his masterpiece, *Nashville* (1975). Although he has worked in a multitude of styles and genres (including art films like *A Wedding* and *Quintet* and—in the period immediately preceding *The Player*—even television), his work has consistently demonstrated the ironic tone that marks this film. Despite the ups and downs of his long association with Hollywood and his clashes with several different studios, Altman has always maintained good relations with casts and crews, who generally regard him with genuine affection. For all the satire in *The Player*, it seems evident that he returns the favor.

Cinematic Qualities:

1. The opening tracking shot is both an homage to Welles' *Touch of Evil* and a virtuoso technical achievement for Altman, allowing the spectator to wander across the lot and eavesdrop on various “pitches.”
2. Perhaps Altman's signature stylistic device as a favorite of auteurist critics is his use of multitrack sound recording to produce overlapping dialogue. Usually, he includes so much verbiage that the words become impossible to process completely, enhancing the film's complexity and ambiguity.
3. Altman also favors the slow zoom rather than a tracking shot to get closer to his characters.
4. As part of the “cinema of attractions” in *The Player*, Altman calls upon his old friendships to incorporate numerous celebrities in cameo roles; the credits list more than sixty such appearances. Similarly, the film is filled with dozens of allusions to other pictures, stars, and directors, allowing movie buffs to demonstrate their inside knowledge of the cinema.

Questions for Discussion:

1. *The Player* is undeniably clever and entertaining, but does its critique of contemporary Hollywood deal-making add up to a serious commentary on either runaway American commercialism or the decline of artistic standards in film culture?
2. June tells Griffin, "Knowing that you've committed a crime is suffering enough. If you're not suffering, maybe you haven't committed a crime." This kind of subjective morality may be even more pertinent at the end of the decade than it was at the beginning. To what extent has Griffin gotten away with murder?
3. What are the critical differences (if any) between *The Player* and the film-within-the-film, *Habeas Corpus*?
4. Hollywood has a long tradition of making largely unflattering movies about itself, including *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) and *Sunset Blvd.* (1950). Films like *The Player* and *Boogie Nights* (1997) satirize the same scene after the collapse of the studio system. How do these self-reflexive works also reflect the shifting cultural values of their own time?