

QUINTET

The film crew sets up in Frobisher Bay with the temperature at 30 below. Counterclockwise insets are: One of the iced sets that were also kept at below zero temperatures; Paul Newman on the set of the information center; Playing Quintet after the world holocaust; Bibi Andersson as Ambrosia is illuminated by the single bare bulb in her quarters.



What? Robert Altman (director of *M*A*S*H*, *Nashville*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, etc.) is directing Paul Newman in a Science Fiction Post-Holocaust film shot in the Arctic . . . ? Yes!

Interview by JAMES DELSON

ROBERT ALTMAN IS a director whose fantasy trips through the American experience have a goodly chunk of Don Quixote along for the ride.

Whether he is dissecting the American Space Program in *Countdown*, the Army and the medical profession in *M*A*S*H*, country music and politics in *Nille* or the sacred bonds of conubial bliss in *A Wedding*, Altman has always retained his iron-clad idealism, couching his films in a suit of armor forged by a belief in the basic tenets of the American Dream. For every departure from the norm, the underlying theme is eternally hopeful, forever optimistic. Altman's fantasy films, most notably *Images*, *Three Women* and *Brewster McCLOUD*, have not been overwhelmingly successful commercially, though they have attracted a large cult following. His vision of reality has been supplemented by incredible camerawork, giving general audiences little to grasp as they are led through his dreamstate wonderlands. What plots there were seemed elusive to most, and the characterizations, usually featuring actors who were unknown to the masses, prevented audience identification. Result: withdrawal from the experience.

Now comes *Quintet*, Altman's new film of futuristic death games. Set in a distant time when the world is enveloped in ice, *Quintet* offers Altman fantasy for the masses for the first time. A story of the ultimate gambling game, where players move through a city as though on a playing board, killing each other instead of removing their opponent's pieces, it may be as cryptic as other Altman journeys in the past, but because of the casting and linear plotline, it is more accessible than his earlier works. Starring Paul Newman, Bibi Anderson, Fernando Rey, Brigitte Fosse, Vittorio Gassman and Nina Van Pallandt, the movie is a futuristic science fiction mystery with thriller overtones. Choosing to always bite off more than he can chew, Altman once again shoots beyond his reach, but, like *M*A*S*H*, *Images*, *The Long Goodbye* and *Thieves Like Us*, all the elements come together and the result is a classic adventure, both more and less than what he wanted, perhaps. While scouting locations for another film, Altman found a great location in the now-abandoned site of the 1967 Montreal Expo, "A Man and His World."





Above top, the hotel lobby cleared of ice and ready for habitation. Above inset, Ambrosia sits forlornly amid the white shadow of past opulence. Below, scavenger dogs feeding on the dead.



Overwhelmed by the visual possibilities of the location, Altman re-wrote the script he was working on to fit the site, and *Quintet* was born. Shooting the entire film on location, in the outdoors (he wanted the actors' breath to look as real as the sets), Altman struggled through a winter of awesome cold, finishing up the production even further north, above Hudson Bay, just miles from the Arctic Circle.

Contributing Editor James Delson talked with Altman in the offices of his new mini-studio in Los Angeles. Delson commented, "After numerous experiences with the major studios, Altman decided to build his own facilities. Boasting a year-round staff of secretaries, publicists, editors and technicians of every variety, the director will be able to retain complete control over his properties, from idea stage through release, only giving his films over to the releasing company once they are completed to his satisfaction. Though the place wasn't finished (we watched an almost-completed cut of *Quintet* in his almost-completed screening room), it certainly has the feeling of an organization ready to face the world with the Master's product. Bare brick walls, warm colors, and everywhere you look, photographs and paintings of Altman's stars, Altman's productions, Altman's advertisements. It was like visiting a mansion where the proud parents display their whole family tree for guests to comment on. Altman is a medium sized bear, twinkling eyes betraying an otherwise businesslike approach to life and work. Immediately friendly and open, he took me through the large building to an editing room, where we watched several minutes of footage from his even newer film, *A Perfect Couple*. From there it was off in his BMW (no chauffeur, he drove) to the MGM Studio, where we watched several reels of *Quintet* that were being screened to see if the sound track met his approval. Back at the Lion's Gate offices, we finally sat down and talked for a couple of hours. Always thinking, always alert, Altman, America's most prolific director (with four films due to be released in 1979) was a challenge and a delight."

ALTMAN: It was an idea of mine I was going to produce, hiring another director and a writer. It hadn't become *Quintet* yet ... only a dark little melodrama. And I sold the idea to 20th Century-Fox on that basis. When I started to develop it, it kept changing. We didn't know where it was going, but we had sold the film and I had to deliver it by a specific date. I went looking around for locations, where to shoot it, and after a number of possibilities, we settled on the site of Montreal's Expo '67. It had all these wierd buildings and these props and things that were sitting around for ten years. That site gave the story the right push, because we rewrote it with that in mind and it worked.



A casino from their pre-war past offers some amusement for the survivors.

FF: The film's about a game called Quintet?

ALTMAN: The game I'd started back in the original thing—the game and the dogs. There was a game in this culture; it'd have been like backgammon or dominoes or one of those board games people played all the time.

FF: And the dogs?

ALTMAN: These packs of dogs would be roving the streets, which would be kind of intimidating. When we found the Montreal location, we realized the weirdness of the place would allow the dogs to look right, so we became fascinated with the thing.

FF: An international cast works very well for futuristic fantasy?

ALTMAN: That was the point. We'd always started with the idea that we were going to set the story out of time and place. You weren't really ever going to know where you were.

FF: Had it been, had you thought of which director you wanted to have direct it?

ALTMAN: I talked to Walter Hill about writing and directing it. That didn't work out, and he got onto *The Driver*. I never went beyond that. I got very excited about it myself.

FF: Did the budget change when you decided to change the concept of the film?

ALTMAN: Not a lot. I think the set costs went up. And wardrobe costs and things like that. But it didn't really affect the deal in any way.

FF: Was the casting of the actors at all affected by the location, the change of locations?

ALTMAN: No. They never knew where it was going to be. And they never knew what the script was. And they were all cast on the basis of I was going to make a film with them, that's all.

FF: Your original story idea was a kind of thriller with an Irish underground flavor. When you made the transition with the Montreal location to what has now become *Quintet*, did the type of intrigue you were looking for change?

ALTMAN: Well, it was always to be a mystery, with a feel of Kafka to it. It wasn't the intrigue that changed, just the approach to how it was going to be presented.

FF: How complete was the script when you went to shoot the film?

ALTMAN: We were writing constantly through the making of the film. Frank and I wrote St. Christopher's sermon at lunch one day and we shot it two days later.

FF: Is this the case in all your other films: writing so close to the filming date?

ALTMAN: Mostly. It's almost a pattern that we've set up. We structure the film, know what the obligations are, what's going to happen, what scenes are going to take place. One thing's going to follow another. But we don't really dialogue the scenes until a few days before we actually shoot them. And sometimes the same day.

FF: What do the actors base their involvements on, then? Do they have a say in their costumes, in what their actions are going to be?

ALTMAN: Well, it's all done in concert, with one-another. There's no formal way to describe it. It just takes place. I'm going to meet Jim Garner tomorrow night at a party at my house, and that's the last time I'm going to see him until we're in Florida ready to shoot *Health*. We'll probably spend half an hour talking about what I see as the character points. He hasn't read the script yet, but I'm sure that between the two of us we'll come up with an idea where we both agree on the

wardrobe and that kind of thing. He'll probably furnish a great deal of that, since he's the one that's playing the character, so he will end up knowing more about that character than I do.

FF: The casting of Newman in a film would seem to add a great deal to the prestige of a picture and automatically carry with it a certain weight at the box office. Does that have any bearing on your casting of him?

ALTMAN: Well, it had some bearing, but I don't usually cast films in that manner.

FF: That's what I mean. I'm talking about Robert Altman, not a standard director.

ALTMAN: I offered that part to Newman because I thought he was the right age for it. And he carries a certain amount of recognizability. To go with an unknown person in that part would have been difficult, because the audience would have to adjust to him. That would force me to spend time telling about this new character, getting you to like him. Casting Newman here is like casting Warren Beatty in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. It saves me 20 minutes of exposition. Because the minute he comes in you know the film's about him. You know he's a special person. The audience feeds that in. I wanted the hero to be an American because that's the largest audience we're shooting for. And surrounding him entirely with foreigners is a little threatening itself. An audience feels that way automatically.

FF: You also create a certain air of tension by having an international cast playing against Newman.

ALTMAN: That automatically throws the audience into identifying with Newman. He becomes the tour guide, because he's also strange to this world, having been away from it for 12 years. Consequently, we depend on him. We

go with him in everything he earns or sees, and what he doesn't understand we can kind of guess along with him. So Newman's casting is important.

FF: How do you differentiate nationalities when you dub the film into other languages?

ALTMAN: When we dub it, we won't be able to use accents, so we have to do it with language. I had a meeting in Paris three weeks ago. I took the film over there and got all the translators in. We decided to write very strange theatrical language for the different characters. Even though the actors who do the dubbing will be speaking pure French, Italian or whatever, they'll still give the feeling that what they're saying isn't in contemporary language, and is being said differently from the other actors.

FF: Do you also make an effort to differentiate Newman in his rough costume and weapons?

ALTMAN: Oh sure. Sure. He's been in the wilderness hunting for 12 years. I mean it's the same thing as a western. The guy comes into town after being gone for a long time and the town's changed and he's the hero. So he's in pragmatic clothing. His weapon also—when he comes in it's a hand-made spear for killing seals. When he goes and chases the Redstone in the beginning, the spear has been broken in the explosion, but he breaks it off and uses it as a knife. At the end of the picture you see it strapped on to a shaft as a spear again, but I wanted it to look like a World War I bayonet.

FF: Was there a great deal of effort to give each of the characters an individual look?

ALTMAN: Oh, yes. There's a great deal of thought that goes to paint those characters for the audience. We ended up with a medieval look, but it wasn't really our intention. We just figured they'd have cloth of some kind, but nothing very unusual because there's obviously no manufacturing going on. Everything lying around would be remade into clothing.

FF: The weapons as well? It looks like Goldstar uses a carving knife that's been honed down to the nubbin. Gregor has what looks like a long sewing needle.

ALTMAN: That was a sewing awl. We tried not to make anything up. We took the position that everything had to be made from something else. And it became our standard policy. Gregor's weapon was also his cash register, and he used the hole at the top to hang it up.

FF: What about the other weapons? Anything specific?

ALTMAN: That Germanic three-pronged spear that St. Christopher had at the end—we used that because it had a kind of religious sense to it. It was just a design that appealed to us because he kind of represents the church authority—the Pope.

FF: *Quintet* is a game within a film, much like a circus within a film, or anything else in the Altman family of movies—something within a film that supports it. And yet the rules of the game are never clearly explained.

ALTMAN: We haven't had any flak from

anybody that it's too tough to follow. It's very simple. You could draw the board on a sidewalk, and all you need is a pair of dice to play it. I invented the game, basing it on probability games like backgammon, which I play a lot.

FF: Would someone who's played the game of *Quintet* appreciate the film more?

ALTMAN: Oh, yes. And also they'd get it quicker. It's very clear, almost too clear.

Robert Altman (at right) and Vittorio Gassman on the set of Quintet.



First you have a killing order. There are five players in the front game. Each player has a person he can kill and a person he can be killed by. And those that are in between he can only form an alliance with. The sixth space is a safety place, but it's kind of a false safety because you can't stay in there. You must come out with the next roll. So there's a lot of terrific tactics.

It's like backgammon. I can teach you the rules in a second and it's kind of boring until you play for a while, but the more you play, the better it gets.

FF: When we discussed the screenplay you said it changed direction when you saw the location. Had you seen a number of locations before that or was it something that formed in your mind?

ALTMAN: No, it was a gradual thing. We started out by looking at the underbelly of the city. And then as we found these other locations we said, "Jeez, could we use a place like that. That's very wierd-looking... maybe this could work." And then eventually the idea developed into this futuristic thing. We said, "Why not take the same story and set it in this time of depression or depravity." Because the story didn't work, it wouldn't work unless there were desperate human conditions going on. It needed some sort of political expediency. So, okay, so you're in the Irish underground or you're in the Jewish underground, or you're in Iran, and all that kind of crap, and everything's patriotic—then we suddenly decided to take the human condition to a point of total desperation and do it strictly for its adrenal qualities. That's how it really developed to where it is as *Quintet*.

FF: Did the game come to you as part of the earlier script?

ALTMAN: From the very beginning we had people playing this game, the way you see people play backgammon in certain places in Turkey, or mah jong in China, or dominoes in Mexico. And then at one point or another I called the game *Quintet*. And then I said, "Well, now we have to have a game that works." I mean people, even if we're not teaching the audience how to play, know whether somebody's really doing something or not. So I invented the game.

FF: What was the mood you were trying to evoke at the beginning of *Quintet*? Total isolation?

ALTMAN: Yeah. I was setting up what condition the world was in. When the film opens up, we're up above the tree line, with nothing but frozen wasteland, and here is this modern train. You don't really know it's a train until you reach a certain point, but it tells you this is not *Nanook of the North*. But that there's a train, and it's obviously been frozen in for God knows how long. And then you see these people walking. And then we take them into this first shelter. Which, again, has a futuristic look to it, so you know that you're in some time. In other words, it's to orient you to the disorientation.

FF: Futuristic primeval?

ALTMAN: Yes.

FF: You use a model for the train. Have you often worked with miniatures?

ALTMAN: I never have.

FF: This is your first? How did you go about choosing the miniatures?

ALTMAN: We just called a train company that had a model of a train and asked them to send it up, and we put wax on it and took it out and froze it in the ice. Did some tests on the distance the people should be and shot it.

FF: The perspective was all done through experimentation?

ALTMAN: And logic. It didn't cost anything. It was the cheapest special effect that's ever been done.

FF: After the opening landscape when there's nothing but the train and the people, you introduce their first shelter.

ALTMAN: That's some kind of outpost I guess, as they're traveling to the city. And they stop there for the night.

FF: Why don't you ever show the big city?

ALTMAN: I didn't want to show the city because if I'd shown it I'd've had to build a model of it. And the train is something you can look at and you know it's a train because you've seen trains before. If I showed you the city, you would see something that you had never seen before, and you would consequently not believe it. It would look like a model. So the only part of the city you see is that frozen bridge and them coming toward you. And then that entrance kind of ended up in a sort of network. And I just never wanted to show the perimeter of anything. I leave that to your imagination, because if I had shown you what it looked like, the magic would have been gone. Instead, we used the information center to give an idea of the size and complexity of the city.

FF: Did you have any major production difficulties in terms of the cold?

ALTMAN: No, we prepared very well for the film. We anticipated problems, and then we solved them all. I knew we were going to have accidents. I expected we would have broken four legs, hopefully not a back, but only one guy broke his foot on the ice. That was my son. One guy slipped into the water once, and we got him out and his clothes froze on him and we couldn't get him out of his clothes because they froze solid. And we got him into a car and he went into shock. But he was all right. So we had no fatalities, and no dogs were hurt. We didn't lose any. We lost a couple of days shooting because we had a big thaw one night and everything melted. We could not shoot until it froze again.

FF: The sets are just beautiful. How did you achieve the ice palace look?

ALTMAN: We just froze it. We had hoses, and we had a crew of guys who spent all night there spraying water. When we'd get ready to shoot in an area we'd just turn 'em on, and we could never stop them. Because if you'd ever stop the hoses then they'd freeze, and you'd never get them unthawed. So that water was running out of fire hoses 24 hours a day. And we just moved them around. We had to be careful about the amount of ice we put on certain things because of the weight.

FF: I could only compare it to *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*.

ALTMAN: Well, we froze that town in *McCabe* for the chase. When it started to snow we went out with hoses that night. When he came out that first time, that city looked like a Christmas card. Just beautiful. You can't deny the reality of it. That much ice on the screen all the time, constantly seeing the actors' breath works on you whether you know it or not. I mean people literally do get cold watching the film. And you can fake almost anything, in terms of hardware and science fiction and special effects. But when you see that ice there you know it's real. And the very sense of that reality pulls you into the thing.

FF: You went and shot for three days in the Arctic Circle. Was that with Newman?

ALTMAN: And Brigitte Fosse and Vittorio Gassman.

FF: Where did you shoot that?

ALTMAN: Frobisher Bay.

FF: How high up?

ALTMAN: It's above Hudson Bay in the Northwest Territory in Canada, 80 miles below the Arctic Circle.

FF: When you're scouting for that sort of location, it's a hell of a lot different from what you were doing in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* where you have your chase in the snowstorm.

ALTMAN: We had the chase in the snowstorm because it snowed at the same time we were getting ready to do the chase. On *Quintet*, we went up because we could not find a large enough expanse in Montreal. We had the lakes, but no matter where you went somewhere you'd see a tree line. So we went up above the tree line.

FF: Where was the fight supposed to

take place?

ALTMAN: My feeling was that it was an above-ground area that was at one time probably a park.

FF: When you're shooting under those conditions in the Arctic, is it much more difficult to use the cameras?

ALTMAN: No, once you get below freezing, it's just a matter of comfort. You have to keep the moving parts at a certain temperature by heating them. It

*The film crew with
the protected camera
in the frozen north of
Frobisher Bay.*



doesn't make a hell of a difference whether it's zero or 70 below, because your freezing temperature's still 32°.

FF: The packs of scavenger dogs that cohabit the city seemed very well trained. How many did you use and how well did they take to the cold?

ALTMAN: We had 20 dogs that we got and trained here. We took them up there months early, got them acclimated to the cold, worked them in the cold, and we had them there the whole time.

FF: Were you locked into a specific plotline here, one that couldn't be shifted around much in the editing stage?

ALTMAN: Because of the game qualities of the film it has to follow a certain order. I couldn't shift scenes around, have Duca killed before Goldstar because it would have violated the order. It's not like *A Perfect Couple*, where I'm able to shift scenes back and forth because the order of events is not necessarily important, or has an importance. But each film has its own thing. *A Wedding* has a certain order at the end, but we were able to shift around a lot. *Nashville* we could shift anything, almost. But aside from a logical plot construction there is also an emotional construction. I mean you don't do three depressing scenes in a row and then do a hilarious one. You can not follow a scene that's emotional immediately with another that's hysterically funny if the same people are in it. You've got to allow some space in there. So to me the emotional plot structure is more important than the logical plot structure.

FF: Would you say *Quintet* is your most structured film in a linear sense?

ALTMAN: Yeah, probably it is, but each

film's structure depends on where the importance of the structure is.

FF: There's a certain thread of violence that has run through your films. And you have dealt with violence in a most realistic fashion. In *Quintet* you don't, like the sewing needle through the head, or where Duca pushes in the knife. Do you have any feeling at all about what this might mean at the box office?

ALTMAN: I don't know. I wouldn't think so, because I don't think it's real violence. It's ketchup violence, it's fairy tale violence. I don't think it's like seeing a street gang cut off a guy's ear, or like in *The Deer Hunter*, where a guy blows his brains out. We separated the reality. I would think the violence would probably be the most repugnant with the dogs, and probably the woman burning her hand.

FF: The throat slitting?

ALTMAN: Well, that's the worst because it's so graphic. And it happens up front. It's not expected, but I think that was necessary to let you know that could happen so that from that point on in the film, you're sitting there saying, "Oh, Jesus, what's going to happen next, and is it going to be worse?"

I think this cry about violence that has come up in the world is a little bit of a parallel to our political liberalism, which becomes a popular cause. I mean I don't believe there's any validity to it. I don't think there's anything wrong with it. I think that we deal with violence all of our lives. You have to have it.

It's like sports have an importance, play with children has importance, board toys are, I think, as valid as dolls. I mean I don't see anything wrong with it. As I say, it's something that reminds me of fairy tales. And fairy tales were certainly violent. The worst piece of violence I ever saw in a film was when *Bambi's* mother got killed.

FF: A number of your films deal with gambling, more so than any other director. It seems almost a pet subject, of yours. *California Split*, the football game in *M*A*S*H*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, and now *Quintet*. The gambling is more thoroughly integrated here.

ALTMAN: It's part of a lot of the way I think about films. Those things attract me. *McCabe* was a two-bit gambler, a tin horn, a big fish in a little pond, a jerk. *California Split* was about gambling, about gamblers, people who are totally obsessed with it and nothing else. It even replaces sex. Up in Las Vegas, if you interview all the hookers, you'll find the only action they get is from the losers. If the guy is winning he ain't interested. The loser just says, "Well, what the hell, it's a kind of present to myself."

FF: It just seems there's a progression in the gambling you've covered in your films. In *M*A*S*H* it was very loose, unstructured. In *McCabe* it was still just a part of the story. In *California Split* it became an obsession, but now in *Quintet*, it's their whole life and their death as well. It's highly structured, yet you never show a full game in the film. Nevertheless, it seems there are very few moves, it's gotten down to the point where it's very sharply defined, and over very



St. Christopher (Vittorio Gassman) meets with his followers in the baroque setting of *Quintet*.

will appear on the set and I say, "Jeez, That's perfect, how did they arrive at that?" And it's filtered down, the whole mood of the thing, and it's as important that that remain unnamed as it is that the philosophy remain unnamed. It's important that you don't intellectualize it, "This means this and that means that," to where you can look at something and you can say "That's not quite right," and you don't even have to explain why.

FF: The visual styles of your films vary a great deal. You have had the lush countryside and now you have the ice palace of this, again, after *McCabe*. Is this something that's thought out and planned in advance?

ALTMAN: Yes. It's everything that I just said. I'm talking about that as well as the costumes.

When we went to Mississippi to shoot *Thieves Like Us*, I wouldn't take an American cameraman down there. Everybody I talked to was prejudiced against it. "Oh, that old place, I don't want to go down." "The South, that's so terrible." I went and got a guy out of France who would go down and look at this as being as beautiful as it really is in Mississippi. He didn't have that prejudice, and that way everybody else followed. In other words, that broke the thing of everybody having to agree and say, "Oh, that's a terrible part of the country." Well it is a terrible part of the country. But the grass and the trees and the rivers don't have to be terrible. The idea of what takes place in that kind of a lush setting compounds it. If we make everything ugly, what's the picture about?

FF: In *Quintet*, did you decide to use a specific stock and lenses to obtain your grays and whites, dark shadows and dim lights?

ALTMAN: No. We had special filters built for it. The lenses we used were zoom lenses. We decided not to go anamorphic with the film because what we call the "O" filter, the edge filter, on the Panavision screen, looked mechanical somehow, where on the other screen it had a more natural feeling to it. So we went 1.85:1.

FF: I noticed many of the shots seemed to be almost irised out with vaseline.

ALTMAN: That's the filter. What we called the "O" filter, that we built specifi-

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keeps turning and reflecting and we could make it look like it was once projection or something like that." These things are not run by power, just free-swinging on their axes. We really went for a reflective, visual kind of thing. We took maps that we found there with those pentagon shapes on them and just silk screened them onto a bunch of plexiglas. Tied them together with a continuous bicycle chain so when you turn one the others would turn. The lighting of it was the real art—when it wasn't lit properly that set by itself was nothing.

FF: When you're working out the overall visual design of a film do you have one person other than you who works as central computer to make certain that the props, sets, costumes, locations, the look of the actors, makeup and so forth are all meshed together or is that all filtered through you?

ALTMAN: It all filters through me. I use any number of people. We kind of mutually come to a decision of the look of the film. But the cameraman is one thing. I work with him till we arrive at the point where we decide what we'll do. And then I don't pay any more attention to it. The girl who does our wardrobe works very closely with me on all stages. She works on the script, she sits in on meetings, she also does the casting. And whether she designs the wardrobe or brings somebody in, whether she buys it, however she does it, doesn't make any difference. Tommy Thompson and Bob Eggenweiler will get together on the locations. We all work together so much that it's very easy to communicate. We try to communicate feelings rather than specific ideas.

FF: Do you ever just put your foot down?

ALTMAN: We finally got that in *Quintet* where Leon Ericksen, who is the production designer, didn't want to use red. I did. So we used red. There are certain things that I thought of doing that Leon didn't want to do, we did it Leon's way. But once I make those decisions, I have a whole group of hidden artists working for me. People whose faces I never see, quite possibly. And suddenly something

quickly.

ALTMAN: Well, it is a quicker game. But again it served a purpose. I used those elements for my own devices, but we're never dealing with content. Content is unimportant. An artist deals with style. Content's already there. If I did have anything important to say I'd be a fool to say it, because I could pick up a book and find it somewhere else, and said a lot better, no matter what my thought was. So the idea of my work is the style. That's what I'm dealing in. Style.

FF: Is gambling the underlying element in your film making?

ALTMAN: Let me give you an example without having to go into this too much: had the train not worked in the opening there's no way I would have gone to any special effects to make it work. I would have done something else. I want to do it this way and if I can't do it this way I'm not going to call up and say "Send me a million dollars and I'll do something else." That's what—you set kind of an impossible goal for yourself. And I think it's got to be either scary, which again is a gambling thing, or a situation where at first you think, "Jeez, how'd I get into this?" Then you get to the point where you say, "I don't think I can do it." Finally, you ask, "Can we really pull it off?" And you try, because that's the only time you are really forced to be creative.

FF: Is that part of the reason why you're so prolific?

ALTMAN: Probably. Also I don't over-think these things. I have more fun when I'm shooting a film than when I'm not making a film. So why not do what pleases me the most?

FF: Does it come as a surprise to be the most prolific film director in the country?

ALTMAN: Does it come as a surprise? Oh, I don't think I am at all.

FF: We think you are.

ALTMAN: For feature films. But not for television.

FF: The Information Center is a beautiful set. How was it arrived at?

ALTMAN: We found this room with all the outside two-way glass in it. It wasn't really that big. And then we said, "Let's use this for something." And then we said, "Okay, this could be the information center." "And what could we do in there?" And I said, "Let's put in stuff that



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cally for this picture. I spend \$27,000 on those filters. They're downstairs right now, and I don't know if those filters will ever be used again.

FF: Were you trying to focus the eye to center screen?

ALTMAN: Yes. I was trying to never show the audience the perimeter of the film. Keep you in a kind of interior claustrophobia. A residual effect we got out of it was that we found we could make people appear and disappear right in front of your eyes. I mean they don't leave the hard sharp frame when they walk out. They walk toward the edge and they just disappear. The same way those dogs come up. They just appear. It helps the cold because it gives you that kind of sensation of looking through a frosted windowpane. That was a bonus for us too. But, you see, we shot tests up there for two weeks. Full days. With the crews, just getting the cameras to work, and the zoom lenses. And those filters—we had a huge umbilical cord coming out of that camera.

FF: Why did filters cost that much?

ALTMAN: Because we had to design and manufacture them.

FF: Ground glass?

ALTMAN: It's a different process. In other words—everybody says it looks like when you spread vaseline, but you have no control over that. But this had to take the light in and diffuse it in a certain manner, actually a billion little lenses in there. It's very complicated. Many of those had to be made, tested, perfected, and then graded. Then we had to build a thing that changed the distance of those filters. They had to be in different sizes to the different lenses. And they had to move with the zoom lens.

FF: So it was not a zoom lens, but on the zoom principal?

ALTMAN: No. If we were on a zoom lens, we would zoom in toward the filter, so as we zoomed in, that filter had to be mechanically moved further away from the lens, and the reverse when we zoomed out. We had one guy whose only job was to look after the filters.

FF: Do you think that a mass audience will pick up enough of the film to want to see it again to want to pick up on the game?

Above left, Ambrosia (Bibi Anderson) and Duca (Nina Van Pallandt) discuss the ways of the post-war world. Above right, Paul Newman as Essex digs into the first shelter of the ice-covered remainder of their world.

ALTMAN: I think it's true of any film. I think any film is meaningless with one screening. I don't think a lot of people are going to see the film more than once, but I also think that the first time you see a film you have certain anticipations and options that you're conditioned to because of other things you've seen. And so you're always wondering, "Who did it?" "Did the butler do it or what?" And then at the end you find out and you've been so concerned with playing this guessing game that's imposed on you as audience that you've missed half the film.

Now, once you know how it all came out, you know who did or didn't do it, then you can go back and see that same film and you see an entirely different film because you're relaxed. Then you can go back a third or fourth time, depending on the density of the film, and start looking at other things in it. You find out there are many, many things going on that you never saw before. Then you can wait six months and go back and see the film again. And you'll see a different film because of what's happened in your life in that six months. And that's what makes it art.

I mean, take pictures that hang on the wall. You can look at them once and say, "Oh, that's a terrific picture," or, "That's really funny," and you go away, and other times you look at it in an entirely different manner, and if you never tire of that picture, it's art. There's nothing high-falutin' about art, art is the lowest common denominator of communication that we have. Everybody has it. But what really makes it is the change in it. A film's the same way.

FF: What films do you think of that way?

ALTMAN: All films. I saw *The Deer Hunter* and I guarantee I haven't seen *The Deer Hunter*. It's not the kind of film I

want to rush in and see the next night. Now, there are certain films that lose, that go the other way. You see them the second time, you say, "Wait a minute, this thing isn't quite as good." *Z*, for instance. *Z* I thought was a fantastic film the first time I saw it, the second time through I didn't like it as much. And the third time I didn't like it at all. I'm not criticizing that film, but you don't know how those things are going to work on individuals.

FF: After I saw *Quintet*, I wrote down the films that struck a similar chord in me in the past. The first was Hawks' *The Big Sleep*. That had so many textures to it that I've seen it maybe 20 times now, but I still can't figure it out.

ALTMAN: Neither could Raymond Chandler or anybody else.

FF: I also thought *The 10th Victim*, bore comparison.

ALTMAN: *Quintet* has a lot of *The 10th Victim* kind of feeling about it. I didn't see the picture but I know the story line and to me, that was the most dangerous comparison that would be applied to the film.

FF: We know you didn't want to get into discussing this, but when your characters say things like: "Life is merely a pause, an interruption, in the void that precedes and follows it," aren't you kind of asking an audience to think about it?

ALTMAN: That's a religious dogma. St. Christopher represents the Pope. He's every clergyman, every cult leader ever born.

FF: "Every time you defeat death you feel alive." That's Gregor's philosophy?

ALTMAN: That's the game's philosophy. That's the philosophy of Gregor... a pessimistic philosophy. And Essex does not buy it. He says, "I am going North." Gregor tells him there's nothing there. He says, "You won't last a day and a half. You'll freeze to death." Essex says, "You may know that but I don't." And that's the human spirit—that's the decision—no matter how stupid it is.

FF: And what happens to Essex when he goes North?

ALTMAN: I am fully convinced he's frozen to death out there right now, and that world is absolutely silent and gone, but as Essex said, he didn't know. ●