1902, the American northwest. We see a man riding into a small mill town, he’s wearing a gaunty fur coat that looks like its costs more than the town itself. He parks his horse, lights a cigar, and struts into the only bar in town. . It's a run-down and hastily built place only meant for locals, lit only by a few oil lamps strung about the place. Surrounded by a sea of mill workers covered in sawdust and grime, we see the man walk in in a three-piece suit, acting like the most important in the room. As conversation about the man and the rumors he brings with him start to sprout, we see him lay a red velvet cloth over a table and begins laying out cards and chips. He’s a poker man. He already had everyone's intrigue, but now he has their attention. As workers surround him and clammer for his attention, The man gives smirk to himself. He’s a cowboy, a mythmaker, a man with hundreds of rumors to his name. The man is confident in the image he's built for himself, and for the rest of the film, that image will be dissected and deconstructed until nothing is left but a man, a weak and scared man.

McCabe and Mrs. Miller is a 1971 film directed by Robert Altman with actors Warren Beaty and Julie Christie playing the titular duo. Altman was known to create films that simultaneously celebrated and criticized American culture, with two of his biggest examples being the Vietnam war satire film MASH and the country musical epic Nashville. For this film, Altman looked to the American west for inspiration, and sets the film at the end of that era. When people realized that the stories that came from that time were just that, stories.

The film follows John McCabe as he rides into the town of Presbyterian Church so he can make a name for himself and build the best bar and brothel Washington state. The first act of the film keeps up with McCabe's cowboy façade as he goes around getting the workers and supplies needed to start up his establishment. He walks around confidently letting the rumors of his past thrive around him, boosting his ego and further preserving his image. It isn’t until Mrs. Miller comes to make a deal with McCabe where his character really gets challenged.

(Play Audio of Mccabe & Mrs.Miller fighting)

Mrs. Miller was just the catalyst for these revelations. As the film goes on, other people, companies, even the government start forcing McCabe to abandon the cowboy persona and admit to himself how weak he really is. But the film doesn’t look down on McCabe, it empathizes with him. As the movie goes on, a romance sparks between McCabe and Mrs. Miller. And from that, McCabe realizes just how lonely he's really been.

(1:36 time code in the movie about how he's never really trusted anyone)

But McCabe isn’t the only one going through changes. From Mrs. Miller and the prostitutes to the other bar owners and patrons. Everybody is trying to go through life with a mask on, hiding through a whiskey glass or opium smoke, just trying to get by in a time where America is even trying to take its own mask off.

But this film couldn’t have been made without the director behind it. Robert Altman is personally my favorite director. His films are empathetic in such a way that I don’t see many other of his contemporary directors try to tackle. While directors like Scorsese and Kubrick create protagonists whose evil seemed sewed into their own identity, Altman made his characters

through a more humanistic lens, portraying their negatives not as innate traits, but as responses to a harsh world. And he shows just how these traits can be fixed through companionship and acceptance.

But Altman didn't show this empathy just to his characters. He was known to treat everyone in his cast and crew with respect. Many of the people he continuously worked with became lifelong friends of his, and this kind of energy bled into his work. Altman was known to have a very improvisational method when making films. Many times, the actors would say or do things that weren't in the script, or they would create new shots and scenes the day of shooting. Altman was a collaborative worker, so he trusted what the other artists on set would bring to the table. While there is a benefit to having a very specific vision for a film, that kind of individualist thinking could deny the unanticipated possibilities of improvising or. I'll end this review with an excerpt of Robert Altman recalling a phone call he had with Stanley Kubrick about the film. One that perfectly portrays two amazing directors on opposite sides of the spectrum of filmmaking