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films in focus

by Andrew Sarris

Robert Altman's **"IMAGES"** has been around for some time now, and I have been meaning to write something about it, but I have had a hard time getting myself into the mood. I like it somewhat, but I can full understand its not being liked at all. Perhaps I have been guilty of subconsciously sheltering it from the backlash of excessive expectations. A vain hope indeed in an era in which no one critic can any longer shield a film from the barrage of mindless blurbs automatically shelled at each new attraction even before it opens. (That some of these mindless blurbs are my own does not make them any less mindless, severed as they are from any sense of thoughtful context.) An additional complication with "Images" for the journalistic reviewer is connected with the problem of revealing a trick plot which slides over the icy surface of slippery conventions. It has always been considered bad form for a reviewer to reveal to his readers what actually happens in a movie. Thus the ideal movie review is supposed to consist of a series of firm value judgements applied to tantalizingly vague generalities. But not for this reviewer. Though few of my critiques ever contain all the necessary ingredients in their proper proportions, it still strikes me that one part of concrete analysis is more flavorful than ten parts of abstract attitudinizing. Still, for those readers with a rooting interest in the outcome of the plot of "Images," here is my evaluative blurb on the film: "The shattered mirror of the psyche and the camera in a whodunittowhom mesmerized by Marienbadism. Susannah York gives a stunningly intelligent and sensual performance, but the men are overdrawn and underdeveloped. A haunting, uneven work."

The reader who has not yet seen "Images" and who may wish to do so is hereby advised to read no further. There are only six performers in the film: Susannah York, Rene Auberjonois, Marcel Bozzuffi, Hugh Millais, Cathryn Harrison, and John Morley, the last-named playing a visually and tactically crucial but psychologically insignificant character. Hence, the drama revolves around five characters: Cathryn (Susannah York), Hugh (Rene Auberjonois), Rene (Marcel Bozzuffi), Marcel (Hugh Millais), Susannah (Cathryn Harrison.) If one looks closely at the names of the characters with relation to the names of the players, a mirror pattern of sorts emerges. Hence, Cathryn is played by Susannah, and Susannah by Cathryn; Hugh by Rene, Rene by Marcel, and Marcel by Hugh. What is most interesting about this minor conceit of chained-together nomenclature is its complete detachment from the plastic presences on the screen. That is to say that neither the duality of Cathryn-Susannah nor the trinity of Hugh-Rene-Marcel is truly composed of interchangeable mirror elements. Susannah York's Cathryn is not simply a full-bodied woman to Cathryn Harrison's adolescent Susannah; she is also the central consciousness of the film, so central, in fact, that Marcel Bozzuffi's Rene is not a real character at all, but instead a mere figment of her feverish imagination.

Here then is Altman's first major miscalculation in terms of a Marienbad game plan. Whereas Resnais and Robbe-Grillet remained equidistant from the three major pieces floating through the interstices of their three-dimensional chessboard, Altman filters all his imagery

life, but merely as the missing clue in a murder mystery. The ending is therefore cerebral in the tinniest way imaginable, and even the pattern of mystification seems trivially complicated rather than truly complex. All that is hoped for from the implications of the images evaporates with the clearing up of the foggy plot. And so the movie "means" nothing or, at most, very little. Still, "Images" stirs the senses while it is being experienced despite the schematic mold in which it is confined. And it is to Altman's credit that he could improvise as freely as he has with what seems to have been a dream project of his early adolescence.

"The story is not in any sense autobiographical," Altman is quoted as saying in the studio production notes. "He maintains he has never known a woman like the one in his script, although he does not disavow that emotionally or imaginatively the story may have subliminal sources. He wrote a bizarre poem about mirrors when he was 13, as a Jesuit school lad in Kansas City, and that's the only precedent—as slippery as it is—that Altman can personally find for the film."

Even without this meager testi-

mony it is possible to interpret "Images" as two separate movies in conflict with each other, the first movie recreating the lifelong obsessions of a haunted artist, and the second the surface symptoms of a troubled woman. At times the artist blocks our view of the woman, and at times the woman blocks our view of the artist. The film itself hovers perpetually between artful ambiguity and mere confusion and pretention. And the audience is too often forced to conclude that the rug is repeatedly pulled from under its collective feet with no apparent justification. And since the rug is never replaced until the last climactic rug-pulling, the director-scenarist is blamed for playing an unfair game in which he makes up the rules as he goes along and breaks them when he feels like it. Thus, right near the beginning of the film, Susannah York receives a mysterious phone call evoking the intrigues of an external tormentor over her husband's after-hours hanky-panky. There has been no suggestion up to this point that the wife is capable of hallucinating an entire telephone directory. Vilmos Szigmond's optically obsessive camera work, Leon Ericksen's fluidly claus-

trophobic set design, John Williams's sensuously spiraling musical motifs, and the absurdist resilience of the performers eventually put the audience into the picture. Once Susannah York is seen gazing at Susannah York across a great distance of space and/or time then presumably anything goes and nothing matters very much. But it would seem nonetheless that Altman had broken some kind of unwritten rule at the very beginning by his teasingly gratuitous unconcern with that most implacable of all melodramatic mechanisms, the telephone.

But it is when the men, real and remembered, in Cathryn's life make their not-so-grand entrances that Altman's overall plan becomes most problematical. Rene Auberjonois as the hapless husband Hugh seems to lack even the minimal macho of a Casper Milquetoast whereas the remembered lover of Marcel Bozzuffi's Rene and the returned lover of Hugh Millais's Marcel are sexually predatory to the point of parody. As it happens, the men rotate around Susannah York's tortured but still luminous tempt-

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ress like three monstrously oversized moths. Scenes of grotesque indecorum lead inexorably to scenes of gruesome violence, but without rhyme or reason or the slightest intimation of the elective affinities. The casting of the men is simply too bizarre and idiosyncratic even for the subjective phantoms that they eventually become. And so despite the interchangeability implied in their interconnected names, they break apart on the screen into massive lumps of unexplained strangeness. Altman's casting here, like Resnais's in "Muriel" and "Je t'aime, je t'aime," seems to be driven by a fear of banality into the pitfall of peculiarity. Auberjonois, an Altman regular, seems especially implausible in any part except the pedagogically prehensile sparrow he played in "Brewster McCloud."

But even if the ineffective incongruities of the males in the mise-en-scene could be overlooked on the grounds that Susannah York's Cathryn is the shaping consciousness of the screen images, Altman does not allow the spectator to settle back comfortably as Susannah's surrogate. What Susannah sees may be real or imaginary, Susannah herself as menacing alter ego or Susannah merely as the obliterated Other swallowed up by Susannah's narcissistic delusion, and, sometimes, most delectably of all, by Susannah's nude delirium as the visual embodiment of a cineaste's congealed sensuality. Susannah York thus fleshes out Altman's fragile forms with a vibrant presence that Altman was perceptive enough not only to anticipate and adapt, but eventually to elevate into a figure of style. Hence, the paradox of "Images" being so

much more impressive in itself and of itself than for any afterthoughts of ulterior edification. But it is not a question of Susannah York triumphing over Robert Altman, but rather of Robert Altman appreciating Susannah York. "Images" is thus validated somewhat if only as a reminder that cinema is at least as much spectacle as signification.

It might be noted in passing that Altman resorts on occasion to the old Fellini trick (vide "La Strada" and "8½") of making reality seem more fantastic at first glance than fantasy. Hence, whereas Marcel Bozzuffi's spectral lover pops up in the most matter-of-fact fashion amid the clutter of furniture, Cathryn Harrison's all-too-substantial Susannah first materializes as a Jill-in-the-box perched behind a cellar door, her quizzically childish face a marvelous study in eerie passivity, Susannah York's understandably shaky Cathryn quite sensibly closes the door to give this apparition a decent opportunity to disappear of its own accord. But when the door is reopened, the apparition is still there in all its resplendent reality. Here then is a sample of Altman's locked-in humor and laborious flippancy—laborious because he displays an increasing disinclination to round out a joke with the classical sweep of a self-confident entertainer like Fellini. Instead, Altman (like recent Bergman) becomes more pinched and more penurious with his audience as if he were afraid his own soul would be diminished in direct proportion to the pleasure he provided the spectator. There is consequently in the cool non-reaction of the characters a very fleeting reflection of the cultural insecurity of the film-maker. Altman is of course hardly unique in his stylistic uneasiness in an age when people have simply stopped going to the movies except under the most extreme provocation.

The saving grace of "Images" is Altman's generosity to Susannah York's iconographical identity. He has not only reshaped a part originally designed, in turn, for Sandy Dennis and Julie Christie. He has gone so far as to allow Susannah York to embellish her characterization with disjunctively lyrical passages read aloud from a children's book ("In Search of Unicorns") the actress has written on her own time in real life. Altman thus collaborated with Susannah York in an unusually elaborate way to enrich the inherent ambiguity in the cinema between the performer (the plastic factor) and the part (the literary factor).

And, oh yes, the plot. As far as I could make out, Susannah York's Cathryn hallucinates successive murders of her two lovers, and then thinks that she has murdered her own malevolent alter ego

responsible for the murders and the slutish excesses which preceded them only to discover that she has, in fact, ended up actually murdering her own husband. The crucial confirmation of this "solution" is provided by a ponderous glimpse of that otherwise insignificant Irish lorry driver mentioned earlier in this piece. Clip and save and don't think about it too much. Just enjoy the spectacle for its own sake.