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3 Women

Robert Altman's new film belongs to that rare category of imaginative works which defy analysis. Whatever the 'ideas' in it, they seem, both during its two hours running time and on later reflection, to be irrelevant. *3 Women* (Fox) is a vision. It happens to use an enormous number of complex and sometimes wayward cinematic and narrative devices, and I can understand how alert and sensitive cinemagoers may be affronted by what they take to be perverse, obscurantist or downright pretentious. It is so rich and mysterious in its imagery that it is bound to set off radically personal reactions. There will be those who reasonably ask what it is 'about': Feminism? The nature of identity? The heartlessness of the consumer society? I can only report that I was absorbed throughout and that pondering later I cannot find any of these questions important.

Standing before Bosch's painting 'The Garden of Earthly Delights' in the Prado we do not ask about meaning; later, reading that much of the imagery comes from the beliefs and habits of obscure religious and social sects acting on a profoundly paranoid imagination does little to help one's appreciation. One has been affected by a mystical apprehension of fear and beauty. To pursue this image in the same museum: confronting Velasquez' 'Las Meninas', an equally

'Three Women': Janice Rule, Shelley Duvall and Sissy Spacek



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great work, there is nothing one does not want to know about the artist's use of space and paint; one wants to learn exactly what his political, emotional and artistic intentions were. There is an intellectual ferocity about the painting which invites critical scrutiny. So in Altman's *Nashville* there is a tumultuous social and political subtext which breaks through the imaginative substance of the film. *3 Women* is certainly not a parable, and I don't think it is even an allegory, let alone a 'statement'. It is a vision of love.

Behind the titles a dark, softened, diagonal shifts over mosaic-like murals of clawed, large-genitalled monsters and then into a swimming-pool where geriatrics are being patiently walked like quiet animals, thigh-deep through curative waters, by beautiful young girls. There is a peculiar slow busyness about this place—the girls are neither nurses nor models, the patients do not seem exactly ill, just old. Voices and splashes are muted; the focus changes often; for example from a meandering crone to two identical wicked-angel twins. Perhaps nothing is happening here. An invented world.

Soon we are caught up in a 'real' story. We are introduced to two of the three women who make up the title. Pinky (Sissy Spacek) is taught the job of perambulating the wrinklies by Millie (Shelley Duvall). The naturalism of these early scenes has the comic power and tenderness of a short story by, say, Dan Jacobson. Pinky idolises Millie, becomes her flat mate and visits 'Dodge City', a desert bar where the boys in the back lot are shooting and dirt track riding. We become absorbed in Pinky's obsession with the daffodil or primrose clad Millie (even her car is mustard coloured and her flat is like the risen sun). At 'Dodge City' lives the third silent woman, Willie (Janice Rule looking a bit like Magnani), whom we discover is the perpetrator of the murals; she's sullenly at work on some new ones. She serves a beer with minimal grace and has the self-absorbed look which says 'I'm an artist: keep out'—a warning which, in life, one would unhesitatingly heed. She's married to a drunken, ageing dude who's given to practical jokes and fornication.

Back at the apartment, which looks out on a communal swimming-pool, Pinky and Millie are trying to get it together. The central motif of these scenes is the wonderful susurrating monologue which issues from Millie. She talks of her prowess as a cook, of her boy friends, of the nights when Pinky will have to sleep on the truckle bed in the other room, of her glamorous

ex-flat mate. The indications that most of what she says is 'yellow-talk'—that it's the desperate chintzy cheerfulness which betokens fantasy—are given to us both delicately and brutally. Each time she is rebuffed by one of the party round the pool, Pinky is more completely under her spell. Millie is a beautiful young Californian version of Barry Humphries' Edna Everage: monstrously self-deluded but with a built-in survival kit. Her knowledge of cookery is revealed to go little further than advice on how to tube an orange paste on to a cocktail biscuit to which she gives the exactly Everage title of 'a sociable'.

There's a problem here. Shelley Duvall is so attractive it is hard to believe that for all that chrome and gamboge jabber she wouldn't be loved—let alone tolerated—by anyone but Pinky. Her isolation is unconvincing, ensconced as it is by such overwhelming physical and, indeed, spiritual charm. It is reported that Miss Duvall wrote '80 per cent of her dialogue', which proves that she is not only a terrific actress but a very good writer. Part of the marvel of her performance is its spontaneity. The way she says 'Thanks' to Pinky's many compliments tells us in the subtlest way that she has got what she's after: respect. She can't add anything faced with the bright fact of recognition, though she's detached to the point of severity in her journal about Pinky's imperfections as a companion. Life—the geriatric pool, the bar, the apartment—is one thing. The journal is truth.

There is another problem in these early scenes. In my opinion Sissy Spacek does not have the charm or the conviction to convey the rapturous engrossment, the predatory innocence which should prepare us for the changes which are to follow. She's a neat actress—good at timing asides. She blows bubbles in her coke with comic authority, she can drop a brick as if it were a feather. There's exactly the wrong sort of calculation about her acting, which makes Shelley Duvall shine all the brighter.

The film shifts, like that wobbling horizontal line which we see again and realise is the high-water mark of a miniature aquarium in Millie's flat—the film changes pace and form almost halfway through. Millie brings back Willie's drunken husband, Edgar, to make love. Pinky is horrified: 'But his wife is pregnant,' she protests. Millie is understandably irritated to be given a cautionary put down by her adoring lodger and is sharp to her. Pinky rushes out and flings herself from a balcony into the pool—also decorated with those nasty monsters painted by Willie.