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## FILM

### '3 WOMEN': THE REAL THING IS SOMEWHERE OFF CAMERA

CYNTHIA OZICK

Robert Altman's "3 Women" is a brilliant, arresting, terrifying, and demonic film. (Each of these adjectives, like one of the film's own characters, is a stunt double, designed to mislead. In the manner of "3 Women" itself, which concludes with the unravelling of a riddle, my opening adjectives must wait for their unmasking until the last reel.) Though (or because) it is set in the dazzle of a California sunscape, there is an Aztec, Egyptoid, Canaanitish horror about it—those cults dominated by desert and tomb, and by empty gods who are fed newborn babies for their appeasement. Such death-celebrating civilizations are famous for the bright colors and coarse



Demonic duo: Sissy Spacek, Shelley Duvall

forms of their art.

Custom and protocol pledge us not to reveal the end of a movie, particularly when the end surprises with terror. All the same, it is essential to describe the final scene first.

We see an ordinary family of ordinary women. What is unusual—though, on the American scene, only somewhat unusual—is that it is a family with no male in it. The youngest is Pinky (played by Sissy Spacek), the daughter. She is desultorily reading a cheap magazine behind the counter of the family business—a deserted bar, with silent jukebox, in the exurban California desert. A truck drives up, delivering cases of Coca-Cola. "I need someone to sign for this," the deliveryman says. "I'll get my ma," Pinky says. The mother, Millie (Shelley Duvall), comes out and signs. She wears an unsightly bandanna, her eyelids are thick, she is slovenly and work-worn. Clearly life has brutalized her and made her impatient. She speaks sharply to Pinky: tonight, she says, Pinky is going to have to help with the dinner. Pinky, barefoot and sullen, follows the mother past piles of old rubber

tires, across the scrubby backyard, kicking up dirt. On the porch swing sits Willie (Janice Rule), a woman of uncertain age, but older than the mother; perhaps she is Pinky's aunt. Pinky offers the aunt a Coke. The mother calls to the daughter to get started peeling potatoes. The potatoes suggest a simple and solid meal, farmlike and of the earth, with no artifice. The emphasis in this family is on the fundamental—no, the elemental—things. But the daughter is lazy and sly; though she says "Yes, ma'am" obediently, she is purposely dull about which pot to use. The mother catches her out. "You don't have to be so mean to her," the aunt protests.

The scene and the film end.

Mother, daughter, aunt: an undistinguished representation of domestic friction, domestic power relations. But, experienced against what has come before, the small "normal" scene is in actuality a Grand Guignol—sensational, freakish, kinky, surreal, frightening. The truth is that the three women are not related by blood in the slightest, if "blood" is taken to mean kinship. The age differences among them are insignificant. The "mother" and the "daughter" are former roommates. Each of the roommates has had an affair with the dead husband of the "aunt"; we learn from the truck driver that the husband, a drunken gun-lover, shot himself. Earlier in the story, the "aunt," whom we have seen in howling childbirth, was delivered of a dead son by Millie, the "mother." What binds this trio is not the blood of kinship, but the blood of death.

Everything we have taken in of this final scene is a charade. But it is a charade that means business; it is an ongoing and permanent assumption of roles, not a game. These are the roles these three know to be appropriate. Each is an orphan, or a castaway, or a runaway. They have reinvented themselves as a family not by coercion, and not even by consent, and not even by default; they are a family

because of the unnatural needs of dominance and subservience. We feel we are in attendance at a chaste brothel, without customers—but it is a brothel all the same: hellish, sleazy, simultaneously sinister and forlorn. A brothel-family in the way of the Mansons, perhaps—linked not, as real families are, by fertility and fruitfulness, but by stoniness and sorcery. The “head” of this family is a death’s head, and the brothel *has* customers, after all—multitudes and multitudes of customers. We, both women and men, are meant to be among them.

We have met these three women before. They are what the Greeks called the Moerae: the Fates, that grim trinity of goddesses who spin the thread of life and snip it off at the end. Pinky Rose, pale as a bud, is Clotho—we have seen her at her sewing machine, stitching clothes. She introduces us to our earliest innocence. The middle one, Lachesis—she who determines the length of our lives—is of mothering age, and saves or does not save. We have watched Millie Lammoreaux steer Pinky safely through the crisis of illness; we have witnessed Millie presiding, as the Fates are said to do, over a stillbirth. Willie Hart, the oldest, is the last—Atropos, she who “cuts the thread off when a man must die.” Willie’s man-child is born without a heartbeat. But the camera averts its eye from the cutting off of the umbilical cord, as if the symbol might wither under the force of plain biological statement.

The story begins with those citizens who are entirely under the command of Atropos.

We see, at the start, a procession of aged, doughy thighs entering a pool. Silent old people—piteous bags of decaying flesh—are led into the water by bored young Nereids. We are at a private sanatorium specializing in curative baths for the elderly ill. “Desert Springs,” it is called, “Rehabilitation and Geriatrics.” But we know no one will be rehabilitated here. The old men and women, with their waxen faces, have the look of walking

## We are at a chaste brothel – without customers – but still hellish and sleazy.

dead. Their firm-legged escorts are indifferent; at the end of the day they jump out of their bathing suits and hurry out to their own bright lives.

Pinky Rose has come here for a job, and she recognizes at once that, of all these self-contained water nymphs, including a pair of serene and beautiful twins, Millie Lammoreaux is the brightest. Millie has the gloss of a seductive confidence. How her hair shines! How her sticky-out teeth shine! Her little skirts, her little car, her trim little apartment, are all as brassy-yellow as the desert sun. Pinky is washed in Millie’s light. Millie has a monologic knowledge of everything important: how to prepare fancy dinners in only 20 minutes from packaged food, how to decorate an apartment, how to get boyfriends, which magazines to read for sophisticated tips on meals and beauty, how to hold a cigarette or a drink, how to wear a dress so as to look just like the magazine pictures. Pinky, childlike and rosy, sees Millie as a living magazine advertisement; she has fallen in love. Millie has the perfect parking space, the perfect wardrobe, the perfect apartment. When Millie’s roommate leaves to go live with her boyfriend, Pinky moves in. Now she can worship Millie close at hand. She copies Millie in everything: in keeping a diary, in not liking tomatoes, in secretly wearing her clothes. She copies her in everything but seductiveness; Pinky is as purely uninterested in carnality as a little child. “You know what,” Pinky tells Millie adoringly, “you must be the most perfect person I’ve ever met.” “I plan everything I do,” Millie agrees. “I figure out what it is I want, and then I set out to do it.”

But what Millie wants is what the myth-ogre of American commerce instructs her to want. Her head is a garbage dump of popular homily.

“The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach,” she says, reciting recipes for banana pops coated with Rice Krispies, chocolate pudding tarts, pigs-in-blankets. Millie is the American Dream Girl, a depository for junk food, junk ideas, junk hopes. She is indistinguishable from any Barbie Doll, those little plastic idols of hollow sexuality. Like Barbie Doll and her hard-sell “accessories,” Millie and her magazine beliefs are all flimsy. Her meals are concoctions of anti-food. Her self-centered monologues are virtuoso litanies, both smug and wistful, of comical self-delusion. Her flirtations begin in failure and end in fib. Men are unresponsive. Seduction doesn’t work. But Millie, after all, like Barbie, is a thing of her time; she goes to bed with Edgar Hart (Robert Fortier), Willie’s husband, once a Hollywood stunt double, now the gun-toting owner of a loutish bar.

If Edgar is a roughneck, Willie is a kind of artist. Draped in strange white hangings, the mound of her pregnancy mythologically shrouded and silhouetted, her face enigmatically shadowed by a concealing hat brim, Willie kneels in a ritual muteness among paint buckets. She finishes a design on a piece of wood, then shoots it full of bullet holes; we are made to understand that, like the Fates, she destroys what she creates. Or she squats on the floor of a barren swimming pool (read: womb or underworld or both), painting bizarre half-beasts on its inner walls. Craving light without mercy, the camera casts floods of sinister brilliance over Willie’s scaly fiends—cannibal-gods with elongated eyes, women’s breasts, pregnant bellies, slender hands ending in gruesome claws. The creatures seem to lift and arch their monkey tails, while nearby stands their ruler, a monstrous demon with pillar-huge penis.

The floor of the swimming pool just below Millie's apartment is similarly decorated, but under water Willie's macabre beasts—they are like sacrificial cultic signs—shimmer with an even more perilous allure. They draw Pinky into their sinuous midst: she leaps from a balcony to shatter herself among the monkey-women. Lust has spoiled Millie's perfection. In her revulsion, plunging after blind obliteration, Pinky strikes her head on the concrete base of the pool.

And just as Pinky has yearned to be Millie—"Do you think they know which one they are?" Pinky once asked Millie about the twins—so now we see Millie becoming subservient, humble, devoted, like Pinky. Pinky is alive, but in coma; she wakes to temporary amnesia. It is fitting for Pinky to be afflicted with this junk disease of soap opera and cheap romance, because she has risen out of the mysterious captivity of her sleep to become Millie. The look of the untouched child is gone. Pinky, usurper and impersonator, paints her toenails, speculates about rape, goes on joyrides, smokes, shoots guns. Toward Millie she is cool, surly, domineering. Evicting Millie from the bedroom, she takes it over to booze and have sex with Edgar. Pinky is even better at being Millie than Millie ever was.

So Pinky and Millie have become each other, while the painted monkey-women curl their red tongues, while malignant chords beat, while we, recalling the twins, are rocked with symbol-seizures. We discover that Pinky Rose's real first name, like Millie's, is Mildred. And Millie's last name—attention to it is often prodded—is Lamoreaux, pronounced La-Ma-Rose. Amorous, morose, hunting more beaux: that is Millie at the start. In the final scene she is the Ma of Rose, and one of the Moerae. So much for a rose by any other name; there is no other name. Like the Fates, each of the film's three women—Pinky-Mildred, Millie and Willie—is a sister-twin of the other, sharing name and nemesis.

Their patterns, like their names, turn, transmute, intertwine. Pinky's amnesia breaks during a nightmare—one of those cinematic swirls which spiral out a kaleidoscopic reprise of all that has gone before. "Can I sleep with you?" Pinky meekly asks Millie. She has come up cleansed from the underworld, magically restored to her innocent self. Pinky climbs into Millie's bed, and Millie chastely, maternally, caresses her temples.

But the sweetness of this womanly embrace is interrupted by

drunken Edgar: Willie is about to have her baby. Bass fiddle and flute for sinister sounds; Millie is the old Millie once again, and takes command. They hurry to Willie. "Go for the doctor!" Millie orders Pinky. Pinky stands paralyzed; as before, she is petrified by carnality, swelling, engorgement, discharge, the surge of flesh. Willie is in shrieking torment. Millie, struggling with the birth, cries out that the baby's head is too big. The baby is dead. Millie advances toward Pinky with long bloody fingernails

## Altman has the reputation of an artist, but he is the dupe of his art form.

and hideous leer; now she is an apparition, a fiend, she has become one of Willie's painted half-beasts. "You never went!" she yells, dripping blood. She strikes Pinky. There is blood on Pinky's face. All three women are wet with the blood of Willie's deathly birth-giving.

After this, the surreal "family" scene, and the film is over.

What must we conclude from this? I reach up and haul down my opening sentence: " '3 Women' is a brilliant, arresting, terrifying, and demonic film." Exactly; and it is also silly and coarse. Its brilliance is the brilliance of crayons. Its demonology is "myth" interpreted by Classic Comics. Its terror is sought, calculated, manipulated by an obvious machinery, like a ride on a Ferris wheel, or a trip through a cheap spook house, where you can glimpse the retracting springs. It arrests the emotions because all coarseness arrests: it is no news to physiology that scary pictures and scary music scare. The coarseness, the crayon brightness, of the cinematic mentality! Any small tale by Chekhov does not collapse into cartoon one hour after consumption.

In Edgar's bar there is a trick wooden head of a crone: when, unsuspectingly, you touch the mechanism, the tongue comes out, the head spits and cackles. The audience for "3 Women" is perceived by the filmmaker to be that wooden head. When crudely manipulated, it will crudely react. There is still another twinship in this film; the audience too becomes Millie, consenting partner in the packaged bamboozlement of commercial America. Banana pops coated with Rice Krispies are not food, and hoodwink coated with artifice is not art.

Robert Altman is not only a famous director (and here he is both

writer and director), so famous that, when you encounter him, illuminations sweat from his brow; he also has the reputation of an artist plying an art form. But an artist does not become the dupe of his form. In "3 Women" this is precisely what happens. Altman intends to mock the barrenness, the murderous narcissism, of popular American myth-values, which devour reality, celebrate shortcut packaging, force-feed hope, revile old age, produce monkey-goddesses instead of live babies, and so on. We know what he means; he means to deride hollowness and to ask, by implication, for healthy fertility. "Real" values instead of "plastic." He is a moral hero, in favor of life and against nihilism.

But the vehicle of his mockery, with its thumping fiddles, amnesia, nightmare, portentous caricature, larger-than-life spookiness, senior-play surrealism, incarnations and twinships, becomes indistinguishable from the objects of his mockery. "3 Women" is an additional datum in the category it wants to condemn. Like Edgar, it is only a stunt double; the real thing is somewhere off camera, living another kind of life. In its representation of "myth," "3 Women" can only tell us once again that women are not simple human beings, that instead they are unfathomable quasi-chthonics, unrealizable apart from bellies, breasts, sex, birth, and, especially, death; that to be a woman is not a humanity sufficient in itself, but must be overlaid with intimations of goddess, cult, rite; that to be a woman is not so much natural as preternatural; that to be a woman is to participate in a mystery, to come to rest eerily among the Fatal Three, for whom to create is also to kill.

In short, more of the same: woman as Muse; woman as an aspect of the Great Mother; woman

as Matrix and Archetype. Robert Altman should go back and read a little story by Chekhov called "A Woman's Kingdom." It is a work of art, in a small space, about a live woman. There are no symbols in it. After that, he should sit through "3 Women" again, laughing the laughter that goes with watching a very large, very complicated, very important machine cough out a shiny little idol with pointy breasts. The idea behind the machine is to make a profound judgment on shiny little idols with pointy breasts. But if the parody-product is exactly the shape of the original, what then?

"3 Women" is brilliant, arresting, terrifying, demonic chaff; part of the junk culture it means to scare us with.

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