# Document Citation

| | |
|---|---|
| Title | **"It's time to come inside now" an appreciation of Altman's 3 women** |
| Author(s) | Robert C. Cumbow |
| Source | *Movietone News* |
| Date | 1978 Aug 14 |
| Type | article |
| Language | English |
| Pagination | 3-10 |
| No. of Pages | 9 |
| Subjects | |
| Film Subjects | 3 women, Altman, Robert, 1977 |

Movietone News 8/14/78 p. 2-10

# "it's time to come inside now"

## an appreciation of altman's 3 WOMEN

by robert c. cumbow

## 3 WOMEN

Screenplay, direction, and production: **Robert Altman.** Cinematography: **Charles Rosher Jr.** Art direction: **James D. Vance.** Paintings: **Bodhi Wind.** Editing: **Dennis Hill.** Music: **Gerald Busby.**

The players: **Shelley Duvall** (Millie Lammoureaux), **Sissy Spacek** (Pinky Rose), **Janice Rule** (Willie Hart), **Robert Fortier** (Edgar Hart).

1969: *That Cold Day in the Park*: Lazslo Kovacs's camera bridges one sequence to another with frequent use of focus-in/blur-out visuals, stylistically underscoring the film's dual theme: the ambiguity and the dissolution of personality. It's a film whose greatest strength lies in its atmosphere. Altman's and Kovacs's command and treatment of space, light, and movement transfix the viewer, claw at his awareness, even while the story itself ultimately disappoints through lack of credibility or interior logic.

Sandy Dennis—in one of the better performances of her career, possibly the only one to take full advantage of her unique blend of naive vulnerability and cloying obnoxiousness—plays a well-off Vancouver spinster, growing to confront the loneliness to which she has found herself condemned. One day she invites a young man in out of the rain, begins to mother him, and gradually imprisons him *a la The Collector*. The boy (Michael Burns) doesn't speak to her, though it is clear he can hear and understand what she is saying; she talks incessantly, delighted to have a listener, someone to care for—someone apparently worse off than her. She treats the boy increasingly as a pet, working toward the moment when she can make him—willing or unwilling—her consort. His silence to her—later revealed to us as a game he often plays with people—serves to stress her loneliness, to provide an almost clinical ear to which she is encouraged to reveal far more than she would to a responsive listener.

When the film momentarily "opens up" to take us to the boy's home, we meet a new character, his sister Nina (Susanne Benton), in whom it appears he may be incestuously interested. The boy tells his sister about the woman, whose growing possessiveness of him fascinates him (and who has not yet secured a firm hold on him; he still comes and goes at will). Nina later comes to the woman's apartment to see what kind of arrangement her brother's got himself into. When she arrives, the woman has gone out, but is due back at any moment. Nina decides to treat herself to a luxurious bath, to her brother's protestations that the women may return and catch her there. Nina ignores him; and Altman cuts away from the bathing girl to the homeward-returning woman, staying with her for an excruciating length of time. We wonder if she will return home in time to find Nina in the bath, and if she does, how will she respond?

By the time she enters her apartment and begins puttering around, putting things away, the suspense has become practically unbearable. She passes the open door of the bathroom, and we see—with an anticlimactic casualness—that Nina is gone (from the *tub*, at least); but the suspense, the agonizing wait, has not been fulfilled. Subtly, Altman begins to work on the viewer's preconception to build yet another suspenseful sequence. She enters the room in which she left the boy sleeping, begins talking to the huddled form on the bed, becoming more and more open and intimate. At last, with mounting tension, she crawls onto the bed herself, invites the boy for the first time to make love to her. The boy's silence doesn't surprise us—we are used to that by now; but the tension has been so powerfully built that, as the woman reaches to pull the covers back, we are ready for anything: the boy, Nina, a corpse . . . She screams (this is the payoff) with shock, anger, and shame as she discovers a doll and a few stuffed animals left there by the boy. It is unquestionably the breaking point for her character: the shame and real horror at having directed her most intimate moment of self-revelation to a stuffed doll, an ersatz person.

* * *

1972: *Images*: The same kind of intimate, psychic suspense is used constantly by Altman in this psychological horror story about loneliness and the threat of reality and fantasy to interfere with each other, to become indistinguishable. When Marcel (Hugh Millais) attacks Catherine (Susannah York), she kills him, and it's the kind of illusory shocking moment we've already experienced several times in the film: something terrible happens, and for the moment it's vivid and inescapable; but moments later it proves to have been Catherine's fantasy or imagination. Because we're accustomed to this by now, we're ready to assume that the killing of Marcel is probably also fantasy. So, too, does Catherine, the protagonist from whose viewpoint the film unfolds. She moves around the house, business as usual, and the camera moves with her; and each time the camera again moves by the spot where the body lay, we

expect it to be gone. The question is not *whether* the corpse is a fantasy but *how soon* we will be returned to objective reality. Yet each time we pass the spot, the corpse is still there; and though Catherine seems to remain confident that it is fancy, we begin to doubt. This time it's real; this time it's not going to go away; the camera will not restore reality. And a visitor is coming toward the door.

In the returning-woman sequence in *That Cold Day in the Park*, we concede that Altman may simply be teasing us with montage. Once the doll on the bed is revealed, we have to admit that we really have no idea how much time elapsed during the cut from Nina in the bath to the woman headed home. But here, in *Images*, we are so certain that the killing of Marcel is fantasy that we are *not* afraid that someone will come in and find the body and have Catherine arrested. What we fear is that fantasy and reality will meet head-on in one of those unthinkable explosive moments generally reserved for science fiction: the meeting of matter and anti-matter; or the time-traveler encountering himself on one of his journeys. Even as Catherine goes to open the door and admit the visitor, she passes the body, and it's still there. But she seems confident where we are not; and as the two enter the room, the body is, of course, gone. Again, as with the empty bathtub in *That Cold Day in the Park*, the revelation is casual; but this time the montage has been tighter, the tension more direct and intimate, the viewpoint more personal. We care for Catherine and her world in a way that we never cared for the woman in the Vancouver apartment, or the brother and sister who might have been caught; and so our reaction this time is "Thank God! That was a *close* one!"

* * *

1977: *3 Women*: With a curiosity that seems innocent enough but is desperate in its intensity, Pinky Rose (Sissy Spacek) takes to reading in the personal diary kept by her roommate, Millie Lammoureaux (Shelley Duvall). She knows where the key is kept, and where the book is hidden; and no sooner has Millie left for a date than Pinky gets the book and key, unlocks the diary, and begins to read. Altman cuts away to Millie, returning; but here again the montage is tighter than in *That Cold Day in the Park*. This isn't Millie getting home later in the evening from her date; the other residents of the apartment building are just starting dinner on the patio, and Millie has reason to comment about joining them. Intercutting tells us this is *now*; and, much as we rather like Millie's self-deceptive poseur, we care more about the humbler, more vulnerable Pinky. Besides, in situations like this one, as Hitchcock has always known and demonstrated, one invariably sides with the person who might get caught. Holding the diary behind her and distracting Millie's attention save Pinky from being found out; and we are relieved when Millie leaves again, a moment later, without discovering the missing key and book. But, as with the comparable sequence in *That Cold Day in the Park*, our tension does not ebb away in relief. It is built on by Altman: he ends the sequence with a shot of Pinky once again reading the diary, still in easy danger of getting caught. He turns himself to other matters now; but we don't forget the tension of the episode, and the real danger in Pinky's willful violation of Millie's privacy. Yet—again like the sequence from *That Cold Day in the Park*—the payoff comes in a most unexpected way (though this time it comes significantly later in the film). Instead of having Millie catch Pinky and bawl her out, Altman has shown us a short, relatively restrained demonstration of Millie's wrath, as Millie reprimands Pinky for having put several things where they don't belong, while Pinky conceals from her the more important matter of the diary. But we won't forget what we *expected* to happen, what we were *afraid* of.

Much later in the film Millie finally does notice the diary key missing from its accustomed place, and the book gone from beneath the pillow. Looking around the room, she sees the book on the writing table, lying open, and goes to look at it. She discovers, to her surprise, that Pinky has not only looked into the book but made entries in it. She reads one, in which Pinky has written of tricking Millie into letting her have the bedroom to herself, and is now wondering how she can get Millie to leave the apartment altogether. At this moment Pinky discovers Millie, and scolds her violently for reading the diary. "Don't let me ever catch you reading my diary again," Pinky says, taking the book away; and the shot is inherited by a medium-close on Millie's bewildered look.

The collision has come, once again, in a way that was most unexpected, almost casual in its presumption. But unlike the clash between self-deception and reality that characterized the Vancouver woman's moment of truth, and unlike the constant threat of collision between fantasy and reality which eventually *do* interfere with each other in Catherine's life in *Images*, what occurs in *3 Women* is a collision of two kinds of reality: the external and the internal.

* * *

*. . . In the desert we had a certain look, and in the interiors we had a different look.*

—Robert Altman

The first thing I noticed about *3 Women* was the way long lenses are used to make Chuck Rosher Jr.'s pho-

*3 Women*: Sissy Spacek and Shelley Duvall.

tography of the interiors rich, deep, textured, evocative—that "can't take my eyes off it" look that Vilmos Zsigmond gave *Images*—while the exteriors are deliberately given a depthless, flat, artificial look. The recurrent, monotonous California desertscape, which reminds both Pinky and her mother of Texas, is a milieu in which Pinky and Millie, riding in Millie's car, appear claustrophobically trapped, as if lost in the two-dimensionality of a postcard picture.

The imagery and look of *3 Women* constantly stress the literal values of terms like "inside," "outside," and "through," all of which define, as well as comment on, the thematic action of the film. Many of the film's terms are apparent from the opening shot: A confusion of color dots form a haze that slowly clarifies itself, bringing into sharp focus the fat, wrinkled legs of patients at a clinic for the elderly, as they step into a hot mineral pool, there to be walked around by the starkly contrasting figures of attractive young women, as Gerald Busby's plaintive atonal music alerts us to an ominous undertone. The tall, svelte figure of Millie appears (Shelley Duvall looking less like a freak and distinctly more attractive than in any previous film appearance), contrasted with the withered and fat around her, but visually compared with our unlikely first glimpse of Pinky Rose: short and squat, but seen through a window and from an oblique angle, so that her face is stretched like an El Greco subject.

Building on the elements of this opening, the film creates a network of its own interior resonances: water and swimmingpools will figure importantly in what is to follow, and so will the unexpected similarity of Pinky to Millie in contrast to the other people in the world. The storyline of the film can be said to begin with the clinic nurse's introduction of Pinky to Millie and Millie's running Pinky through the clinic routine. Pinky plays the role of patient, so she can get the hang of the thing. This is, in fact, Millie's own idea; but it cues us to anticipate role-playing as an important motif in the film. Millie takes the whole thing very seriously, while Pinky

misses no opportunity to improvise comedy. When Millie shows her how to ease a patient into the water, Pinky mischievously submerges her whole body, putting Millie off, and setting up a resonance that will reach to the pivotal point of the film: Pinky's attempted suicide in the apartment swimmingpool.

In the water, out of the water, through the water . . . An aquarium full of bluish water like that of the swimmingpool at the clinic, or the pool at the apartment, is seen time and again. Most particularly, it is a translucent, but not quite transparent, interference through which Pinky more than once catches sight of the pregnant Willie Hart (Janice Rule), whose bizarre paintings adorn the bottoms and sides of the swimmingpools at the apartment building and at the tavern-recreation complex she runs with her husband Edgar (Robert Fortier). Like Kovacs's camera in *That Cold Day in the Park*, Rosher's whites-out, blurs-out, or pans away to blank walls for scene endings, and focuses-in for scene beginnings, often on a minor detail from which it must pan away in order to take in the full range needed for establishment. We see the characters and the film through deceptive light—the same way they often see one another. Roger Greenspun relates the bluish water to amniotic fluid, and the comatose Pinky after her suicide attempt to a child about to be born (Pinky's return to consciousness occurs shortly after Millie's—and our—voyeuristic glimpse of Pinky's aged parents copulating).

That water appears again in the film's remarkable dream sequence: a blue swath that rolls across the screen like colored water in a disturbed bowl, so that the images themselves are seen as if from the viewpoint of someone half-in, half-out-of a swimmingpool. In this smoky blue wash are mingled shots of Pinky asleep (it is her dream); the laughter of Dirty Gertie (the novelty gag at Edgar and Willie's tavern, the carved face of an old crone who spits a stream of water at the unsuspecting victim who follows the direction "Pull her bow and she'll say hello"); Willie's paintings; Willie at the hospital looking in at Pinky (a reprise of an earlier shot: Willie is shot from behind, and her face is reflected in two different panels of the glass through which she looks at the comatose Pinky); Millie and her reflection looking in at Pinky (a reprise of another shot from the same earlier sequence); Pinky with the shrimp cocktail spilled on her dress, only now it's become blood and a knife protrudes from her heart; Millie firing a pistol straight at the camera (repeating an action that was performed earlier in the film by Willie); Willie and Edgar dancing . . . The remarkable thing about the dream sequence is that it incorporates or reprises information that we know to be experientially "real" on the film's own terms, but that we also know is not part of Pinky's—the dreamer's—experience.

* * *

*I think* 3 Women *is really an extension of* Images.
—Robert Altman

Though *3 Women* stands firmly on its own internal imagery, it also sets up some important resonances with other of Altman's films, as well as with Bergman's. Few critics have failed to note that the identity-trading and identity-merging motifs of *3 Women* are strongly reminiscent of *Persona*. The emphasis on dreams is also Bergmanesque (Willie's line near the end—"I just had the most wonderful dream. I was trying to remember it, but I couldn't."—is something Liv Ullmann says near the end of *Shame*); and dead babies abound in middle- and late-Bergman imagery. But though the similarity of Altman's images to Bergman's is scarcely coincidental, neither is it deliberately evocative. For the most part, the images Altman employs in *3 Women* are universal ones; the important thing is the manner in which the images are used, not the images themselves. In a sense, the imagery of *3 Women* is a reversal of the image-pattern of *Images*: In the earlier film, one woman is set against three men who move through her world, and her most trusted friend is a child, a girl. In *3 Women* three women's (shared?) consciousness is haunted by one man and the image of a dead child, a boy. Though the women dominate the film, sexuality is central to its concerns.

From the very first, Pinky has an apparent terror of and fascination with Willie. It seems to have a lot to do with the older woman's pregnancy. Does it connect with a fear of men in Pinky? A fear of sexuality? Whatever it is, it is touched directly and intimately by the paintings of Willie, which seem to terrify and hypnotize Pinky. The paintings—images that seem full-blown from the Id—always represent three women, one pregnant, their stylized, angular bodies partly covered with reptilian skins, menaced by a single male figure, whose relationship to the women is apparently one of violence: lines of threat or stress show him dominating the shrinking female figures. He may or may not hold some kind of weapon.

At Pinky's attempted suicide, the point at which the film takes a new and unexpected turn, all four principal characters are present. As Pinky floats face down in the pool, Willie appears on the patio, calling for Tom (has she come from his apartment?), who fishes Pinky out of the water. Millie is attracted by the commotion, and appears at the top of the stairs, followed shortly by Edgar, fresh from her bed, still buttoning his shirt. Willie's eye catches his, fixes him: Altman cuts from Edgar to the man-figure in Willie's painting on the pool

bottom.

Edgar himself is the thinnest possible image of put-on machismo. A former stunt stand-in for Hugh O'Brian on the Wyatt Earp television series, he practices quick-draw and fires pistols on his own range, gets drunk on beer, and names his establishments after Western locales: the tavern called Dodge City, the apartments the Purple Sage, and the firing range and bike park the Santa Fe Trail—evoke the same phony backlot-facade West that formed the milieu of *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*.

There can be no doubt that Edgar is central to the film's crisis. When he is showing Pinky how to fire the pistol, she aims for the neck on the human-silhouette target, leading him to call her "Killer" and to remark that he fears nothing so much as a woman who's learned to shoot. When Willie is seen practicing her bullet-hole art—a non-objective form to which she turns when not painting her reptilian women—Altman shoots her firing her pistol straight at the camera. After putting holes in her designs, she turns her attention to the silhouette target and smacks a shot into its neck.

At the film's end, after the long, slow drive of the Coke truck up the road to Dodge City, the Coke man, waiting for someone to sign for the delivery, allows as how it's awful about what happened to Edgar, him knowing so much about guns and all. We know that the violent elimination of Edgar has been crucial to the change that has occurred in the lives of the three women who inherit Dodge City and the film.

It is Edgar who, in a way, precipitates the emotional climax of the film. He happens upon Millie and Pinky sleeping together on their kitchen rollaway bed (the bed's used for one roommate when the other has "company" in the bedroom, but the recuperant Pinky's need for a "private room" has forced Millie there permanently; and on this night Pinky has joined her, after her bad dream; Edgar's discovery of the two ironically recalls his earlier suggestion—on the night of Pinky's suicide attempt—that Pinky join him and Millie in bed) and, beer-drunk, tells them that at this moment Willie is having her baby. The two roommates rush to Willie's cabin; but outside Millie tells Pinky to go for the doctor. Pinky, however, stays there and watches—horrified, fascinated, transfixed—Willie's agonized labor and Millie's fumbling midwifery, until a stillborn boy is brought forth. The dead child has less to do with Bergman than with Edgar, with Pinky, and with what happens next: Millie comes outside: "You never went!"—and slaps Pinky hard in the face.

* * *

An interviewer, upon being told that Altman's new film, *Quintet*, is about six people, pointed out to the director that a quintet is a group of five. Altman replied:

*Yes, but* 3 Women *was about two women . . .*

The death of a child is often used in literature and film as contrapuntal symbolism to the metaphoric "birth" of an integrated adult. The three women in *3 Women* become increasingly involved with—and dependent upon—one another, until the finish of the film, in which all three seem to have become a single composite personality. Were they perhaps one personality all along? Is *3 Women* not about two women at all, but about one woman?

The Millie-Pinky story, which receives most of the screentime of the film, is the resolution of two personalities into one, by imitation, usurpation, and assimilation. Early in the film we often see Millie walking with the other four girls who work at the clinic, towering freakishly over them. Pinky is, carefully, never shown in a group with the others the way Millie is, but is seen only as they pass, or talking briefly with one of them in mid-shot or closer, separated from the group by focal distance or montage, so we are never invited to compare her build with theirs, the way we constantly do with Millie. Nor does Millie appear freakishly tall next to Pinky, the way she does when shot with the other girls. From their first appearance, Millie and Pinky are bound together in the viewer's apprehension. Eye-measuring Pinky for a swimsuit, Millie says, "You're a little like me, aren't you?"—and the one point at which the physical difference between Millie and Pinky might be exploited for comic effect evokes only half a laugh, cut by the touching fact that Pinky takes the comment as a compliment.

In the terms of transactional analysis, Millie's parent addresses Pinky's child in the early sequences in which the old hand shows the new girl the ropes, both at work and at leisure. Millie sets herself up as a model for Pinky to follow, and it is a role Pinky eagerly accepts. Seeing the apartment for the first time, Pinky says, "It's perfect," and then tells Millie, "You're the most perfect person I ever met." Millie, unblushingly, as if the compliment were expected, says "Thanks." Millie is reassured by the worship she receives from Pinky, a kind of "I'm OK—you're the Greatest" stroke that reaffirms by approval the validity of Millie's studied "*Cosmopolitan* Girl" lifestyle. But that kind of worship depends upon the contrast—not the similarity—between Millie and Pinky. Pinky, pursuing the greatest form of flattery, has already begun to chip away at the contrast, as Altman and Rosher have done from the very opening of the film.

Millie's very survival seems to depend upon perpetuating the differences between her and Pinky. Returning

home early from a date that didn't work out (she says the guy wanted to go to a strip joint and she refused, but we've seen enough of society's response to this pariah by now to suspect she was simply stood up, or didn't have a date to begin with), Millie takes out her hostility on Pinky, scolding her for leaving things where they shouldn't be. Millie is still playing parent to Pinky's child; but Pinky has grown. For one thing, she is successfully concealing from Millie the fact that she has just been reading her diary. More important, she is no longer responding as a child to a scolding parent. She's had enough. When Millie demands, of a milk carton, "What was it doing in the bathroom?" Pinky responds, "What happened to your date?" Stalemate.

But Millie's hostility towards Pinky becomes more frequent and pronounced, as she becomes more apparently threatened by the new roommate. Blaming Pinky when her former roommate Dierdre and the three men decide not to come for dinner, Millie tells her: "You don't do anything you're supposed to do. . . . Nobody likes to be around you." Yet this, despite her ordered, clean way of life, is precisely what we have come to know is true of Millie! A classic case of projection? Perhaps a subtle change has occurred in Millie's way of looking at Pinky, and the new girl has come to represent not the reassuring antithesis of Millie's healthful glamor but the scapegoat for Millie's growing recognition of her own position as pathetic social outcast. The vitriolic attack Millie launches on Pinky comes when, far from agreeing with Edgar that the roommate should join them in bed, Millie concludes that she would be happier if Pinky were gone altogether—and we know it is distinctly *not* because Pinky's undesirability has ruined Millie's dinner party and forced her to seek pleasure in Edgar's arms.

This is the emotional peak from which Pinky plunges to her suicide attempt, and winds up comatose in the hospital. We see Millie briefly shed what may or may not be crocodile tears; but in any case she seems once again unthreatened by Pinky, for she is quickly herself again, talking incessantly (like the Vancouver woman of *That Cold Day in the Park*) to the unresponsive, unconscious Pinky, the way she talks to everyone, seeking no reply, but only approval. Millie can play parent, again, to Pinky's helpless child.

Still, Millie seems to recognize more and more that Pinky has become an image of herself. Trying to raise some sympathy for Pinky among the clinic staff, Millie says, with something less than conviction in her voice, "Everybody liked her—*really*." It's the kind of unconvincing epitaph we might expect a woman like Millie to write for herself.

Though Pinky began her assimilation of Millie's identity early in the film, by copying out Millie's Social Security number for her own employment records at the clinic, the discovery of the duplication comes well past the film's midpoint, and brings on Millie's most ferocious defense of, and identification with, Pinky. At first trying to excuse Pinky, she says, "She's just a little kid"; but this doesn't convince the clinic nurse and doctor. Indeed, it doesn't convince Millie either. In the mounting stir over the duplicated number, Millie yells, "I quit!"—explicitly rejecting the things about Dr. Moss and his meticulously ordered clinic that are most like her own just-so bachelor-girl life. "I don't want your job," she says, and then switches significantly to the plural: "We don't need it, neither of us!"

But, as always, the seeming novice Pinky is a step or two ahead of Millie. What began as a parent-child relationship and became one of model and imitator has now gone past the stage of equals. Early in the film Pinky had said to Millie, thinking about the twins who work at the clinic, "I wonder what it feels like to be twins?" (Not to be *a* twin, but to be *twins*.) Comic-serious, Pinky asks, "Do you think they know which one they are?" Millie says, refusing to play: "They'd *have* to." Pinky reflects "Maybe they switch . . . " Millie shows a hint of impatience with Pinky's train of thought—a hint of discomfort, too—and says stiffly, "Can we just talk about something else now?" We know—and we suspect that Millie knows—that Pinky's reflections have a lot to do with her relationship to Millie. By the time she quits "their" job, Millie is ready to think of herself and Pinky in the plural; but Pinky has become a vampiric usurper, in the terrifying tradition of *The Caretaker, The Servant* or *Play Misty for Me*. She takes over Millie's role with Edgar. She takes over Millie's car. She begins to shoot the pistol. She no longer answers to the name Pinky, but insists on Mildred. Reiterating her doctor's concern that she have a private bedroom, she tricks Millie into retreating permanently to the rollaway bed. She takes over the diary and makes entries of her own in it, culminating in the one in which she congratulates herself for getting Millie out of the bedroom and entertains hopes of getting her out of the apartment entirely. She discovers Millie reading this, and scolds her sharply. And Millie, with that stunned, bewildered look on her face, seems to realize that she has just come face to face with herself: Pinky has just said to her exactly what she would have said to Pinky had she caught her in that earlier scene—indeed, what we *expected* her to say to Pinky, had the psychological and emotional payoff to that peculiarly Altmanian suspense sequence come then instead of so much later.

And finally, after growing so close to Millie that she has *become* her, and then methodically separating herself-as-Millie from the real Millie, Pinky has that climactic dream, in which her troubled mind conjures im-

ages that we know can only be part of the consciousness of Millie, and others that are uniquely Willie's. Something crucial happens here—something so profound that Pinky comes to Millie in all sincerity and humility and asks to sleep with her, for protection after the scary dream. A reconciliation? A final merging of two into one? An effort to share the dream by sharing the sleep? Whatever it is, it brings Pinky finally and irrevocably to the role of child once again. Shortly afterward, in the predawn that follows that dark night of the soul, Millie will slap her face and scold her; and even as we reflect that nothing has, in fact, changed, we are struck with how utterly *every*thing has changed.

* * *

*They think* 3 Women*'s tremendous, but they haven't seen it put together!*

—Robert Altman

What of the third woman, Willie? She, too, participates in the intricate matrix of inside-outside imagery and identity-sharing. She's first pointed out to Pinky when Millie takes her new roommate to Dodge City: Pinky sees her through glass, the window beyond the bar of the tavern. Moments later she enters the tavern, coming in through a door conspicuously marked OUT. Progress toward the interior is in effect a way *out*, a way of escaping or rejecting something, even while moving toward a greater intimacy. Just as rejection of her parents is at once Pinky's effort to become Millie—who has no parents—and her decisive step away from external reality; just as Millie's quitting the job at the clinic for both herself *and* Pinky gets rid of a complicating external factor in the increasing importance of the interior world; so does the death of Willie's baby boy—and the closely allied "accident" that does away with Edgar—secure Willie's escape from externals into the thoroughly interior world of the film's closing.

Throughout the film, fences, doors, and windows recapitulate in images the film's by-now-evident concern with the inside and outside of the human mind—probably of a single human mind. Our first glimpse of Pinky was through a window. Later, at the hospital, Pinky is again seen through glass, in a sequence in which all three women come together. Pinky, singular and objective, is in a coma in an intensive-care unit. Willie looks at her through the window, and sees not only Pinky but two reflections of her own face: in this shot *we* see one Pinky and three Willies, while Willie sees Pinky and two

Top: at the shooting range with Edgar (Robert Fortier):
Center: artist with pierced flesh (Janice Rule as Willie):
Bottom: sisters of the rollaway.

Willies. Moments later Millie looks at Pinky through the same window, but the number of reflections is reduced by one because of a different angle assumed by Rosher's camera. We see Pinky and two Millies; Millie sees Pinky and a single reflection of herself. The same sequence is repeated, through a blue wash, during the dream sequence, expressed as a memory of Pinky's, though Pinky could have no knowledge of what occurred while she was in a coma. It is upon her emergence from the coma that she denies the name Pinky and the parents whom Millie has brought to visit her. It is upon emerging from the dream that she again accepts the role of child to Millie's parent.

What does it all mean? There is no question that *3 Women* is, on any level, a puzzling film. But unlike many films that aspire to this intensity of personal vision, it is puzzling not because its freedom denies the viewer sufficient information, but rather because its very richness offers the viewer a dazzling, dizzying wealth of information to be evaluated, sorted, reordered. For me, it all fell into place with what Millie says to Pinky and Willie on the porch of the cabin in the final scene.

Following Millie's slapping of Pinky's face, Altman deliberately places stylistic emphasis on the arrival of the Coke truck at Dodge City. One of the few exteriors shot with a long lens, this scene stresses the distance the truck has to go, the thickness through which it has to push itself, before it can intrude upon the new way of life that has settled around the tavern and recreation complex. When the Coke man says he needs someone to sign for the load, Pinky says, "I'll get my mom." Just after she announces "She's comin'," Millie enters, dressed the way Willie was when we first saw her. All three women are represented in the shot, though only two are present. In the next scene, Pinky talks briefly to Willie on the porch of the house. Willie is trying to remember a pleasant dream: Altman's well-publicized assertion that the film itself is based on a dream of his own resurfaces here, with the suggestion that the whole film that has gone before is to be taken on the same terms as a dream: symbolic, not literal, reality. And then Millie says it: "All right, you two—it's time to come inside now"—as if Pinky and Willie were her children; or as if they were vagrant aspects of her own personality, being called at last to return to the still center. One is tempted to tie the three women of the film to the child-parent-adult triumvirate of transactional analysis, or to the id-ego-superego personality structure of classical Freudian analysis. But to pin *3 Women* down to such allegorical rigidity is to deny the film the vividness of its oneiric illogic, which is both its greatest strength and its most disturbing quality.

Pinky is playing Millie now, is even *called* Millie. Millie is playing mother to both women, dressed as the only one of the three who came near to being a mother in the physical sense, and who—because of her pregnancy and her intimate, primitive visions—qualifies as a kind of earth-mother: Willie. Willie has become a sort of gentle sister to Pinky, defending her when Millie admonishes Pinky to do a good job washing the vegetables: "I don't know why you have to be so mean to her."

Altman has panned away from the house, which the three women have entered, and we are so absorbed with the conversation we hear without seeing, that we aren't struck, until the talk ends, with the awesomeness of what Altman has just done, leaving us sitting there staring at an irrelevant pile of old tires, a poor man's version of *Nashville*'s automobile graveyard. Only at this moment do we feel what the film has been trying to show us all along: how thoroughly *outside* we are, and what a thoroughly lonely place it is to be.