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Author(s)	David Thomson
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THREE WOMEN

Robert Altman has played a significant part in the de-mythification of the Western. McCabe and Mrs Miller is a tone poem about a bull-shitter whose incorrigible talk and day-dreaming lead him into one of those humorless, inflexible scenarios of the West where men behaved like solemn icons and calmly killed one another. Buffalo Bill and the Indians though a failure on many accounts, is inspired by the whimsical view of a real West being taken over by show business. It may be an unruly film, but in its ideas it is so much more subversive and enlightened than the bitter nostalgia of The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, which wants both the grandeur of legend and a sense of superiority over it.

Three Women is far more adventurous and controlled a post-Western. It is set in the up-to-date West, in Desert Springs, a spa resort on the edge of wilderness, with "Dodge City" not far away, a hang-out for stuffed dudes with six-guns and ten-gallon hats. But in this dreamy, fond inquiry into female nature, Altman not only establishes the nobility of foolish, commonplace people, he reconstructs a history of family and emotional life, of the aging process, in which the bimbo Millie Lammoreaux emerges slowly as a worthy descendant of the pioneer spirit. It is as if the real expanse and imaginative challenge of a desert and the civilizing process could only be filled by women. --

David Thomson

Directed and written by Robert Altman. Photographed by Chuck Rosher. With Shelley Duvall, Sissy Spacek, Janice Rule, Robert Fortier, Ruth Nelson, John Cromwell (1977, 125 mins)