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Robert Altman Dreams a Movie...

By Andrew Sarris

JEAN PAGLIUS



Robert Altman's *3 Women* is such a stimulating achievement in cinematic art that it makes one rethink the whole aesthetic of motion pictures. My first impulse is simply to point in the direction of the Coronet Theatre, pantomime the word GO with my lips, and let it go at that. This movie is not to be missed, whether one likes it or not. I happened to like it enormously, but my own preference is not the point. There is something so utterly unusual about *3 Women* that its like may never materialize again, even from Altman. It seems to be located at a fleeting intersection of two awarenesses—the artist's and society's. It is both a dream and a document, a set of facts and a cluster of myths. But the mixture of ingredients produces a very strange concoction, one difficult to describe in terms of the rhetoric of contemporary criticism. And no wonder. We have been told too often in the past that this film or that film was going to change the course of the cinema. These momentary sensations came and went, and the cinema continued to ride off furiously in all directions. Nonetheless, the revolutionary tradition in movie reviewing has persisted to this day, with the result that it is difficult to write anything favorable about a film without seeming to legislate style and subject matter for the entire medium. Altman himself has often been the intended beneficiary of this kind of critical prophecy. Hence, *M*A*S*H* was supposed to influence all war films of the future, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* all Westerns, and *Nashville* all fantasies about the American Dream. In at least the last instance, however, what could be more of a rebuke to the pessimism of *Nashville* than the optimism of *Rocky*?

For its part *3 Women* will remind many moviegoers more of the European art-film tradition represented most prominently by Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini than of the Hollywood movie factory. And this may turn out to be the biggest rap against Altman from his erstwhile admirers: that he is imitating Europeans when he should be breaking new ground right here in the good old U.S.A. Rumor has it that Pauline Kael, one of Altman's most fervent champions in the past, has turned thumbs down on *3 Women*. I have never pretended to understand all her reasoning, but I think I can figure out what some of her objections are. In all of Altman's films, but most decisively in *Brewster McCloud*, *Images*, and now *3 Women*, his feelings are filtered through a mystical-aesthetical framework

that limits a reviewer's sociological speculation. Since I do not find self-consciousness in an artist, even a film artist, to be a crippling disability, *Brewster McCloud*, *Images*, and *3 Women* are among my favorite Altman films. It is perhaps my lateht, some would say blatant, antipathy to realist aesthetics that makes me react so warmly to what has been widely publicized as a literal "dream" film.

As the very thoughtful production notes reveal: "Last spring as *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* was nearing release and the two films he was producing, Alan Rudolph's *Welcome to L.A.* and Robert Benton's *The Late Show*, were in their final stages of postproduction, Robert Altman had a dream: 'Two young girls from Texas, dreaming of the good life, meet in a desert community, come to terms with the undercurrents in their lives, and undergo a metamorphosis.'

"Writing down as many images as he could recall, Altman met with executives at 20th-Century Fox and received an initial go-ahead. Several weeks later, with a 30-page outline, and two Texas girls—Sissy Spacek and Shelley Duvall—cast as the leads, the film received a firm start date. *3 Women* began production in August 1976 on locations in and around Palm Springs, his 11th film in seven years."

I happened to interview Altman shortly after *3 Women* had been conceived as a dream project, which, under the circumstances, could be interpreted as a demonstration of male creativity, which, in turn, Plato once described as a pregnancy of the soul. It was a difficult, potentially disastrous time for Altman. The advance word on *Buffalo Bill* was unpromising; *Ragtime* and *Breakfast of Champions* had been shot out from under him as future productions after extensive preparations. The director who had been sitting on top of the heap only a few months earlier was now scrambling to avoid the abyss. His talk of "dreaming" a movie seemed a symptom of desperation in view of the collapse of two culturally presold projects. It was like the old cover story for canned Hollywood executives, who reportedly resigned to go into independent production. Still, I was impressed with Altman's resilience even though I was not overwhelmed by the casting of Shelley Duvall and Sissy Spacek as two of the three women. This was before *Bernice Bobs Her Hair* and *Carrie*, and both actresses struck me as too quirky in tandem to represent a

"3 Women": a mystical masterpiece starring Sissy Spacek, Shelley Duvall (above), and Janice Rule



Altman's characters fashion their lives from moment to moment in a perpetual present with no roots in the past and no regrets for lost innocence.

reasonable range of womankind. Around that time I also learned that Altman's wife had been in the hospital for an operation when Altman had his dream.

It remains the task of future film scholars to determine the precise nature of Altman's dream, and how much of it was composed of guilt and fear and doubt and loneliness and depression. The film inspired by that dream has since taken on an existence of its own. For one thing, Shelley Duvall wrote about 80 per cent of her dialogue, and thus can be said to have collaborated on her characterization with Altman. It is curious that Shelley Duvall's Millie Lammoreaux as a *True Confessions*

type bears a striking resemblance to the gun-happy adolescent Sissy Spacek played in Terence Malick's *Badlands*. That the two actresses are virtually interchangeable, and the two characters virtually inseparable, gives *3 Women* a passing resemblance to Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*. Of course, the extraordinarily vivid sensuality of Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann provides a visual subtext of erotic entanglement at odds with the self-deprecating eccentricities of Duvall and Spacek. Consequently, Bergman's famous superimposition of one face on another verges on vampirish possession, whereas Altman distances himself from his characters and keeps them distinct from each other.

There are other differences as well, differences that should be stressed in view of the frequent mentions of Bergman's influence on Altman. Ever since *Monika* Bergman has dealt almost exclusively with articulate, attractive, accomplished protagonists with the capacity to serve as spokespersons for the director. Altman's characters, with the possible exception of the doomed McCabe, are down and away from the director's gaze, which mixes irony and compassion in about equal amounts. Perhaps the reason that Altman can allow his players so much freedom to improvise is that they are so completely confined in a formal box that all they actually improvise is the degree and dexterity of their wriggling. From an Aristotelian standpoint Shelley Duvall's Millie Lammoreaux and Sissy Spacek's Pinky Rose are such hopeless nitwits that they are not worthy of all the attention lavished on them. The last time that Bergman even took a stab at such a low-life character was with the Bibi Andersson unwed mother in *Brink of Life*, but one could never have imagined Bergman's Bibi cast as either Millie or Pinky. Bergman's characters, regardless of class or sensibility, are afflicted with memory. The past is palpable in their personas. Altman's characters fashion their lives from moment to moment in a perpetual present with no roots in the past, and no regrets for lost innocence. Certainly Altman seems the least nostalgic of all directors, and even when he ventures into the past as in *McCabe and Thieves Like Us* he translates supposedly convivial and communal eras into modernist terms of social dislocation. Part of his artistic strategy can be interpreted as a revisionist attitude toward old Hollywood conventions, but part can be

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Altman

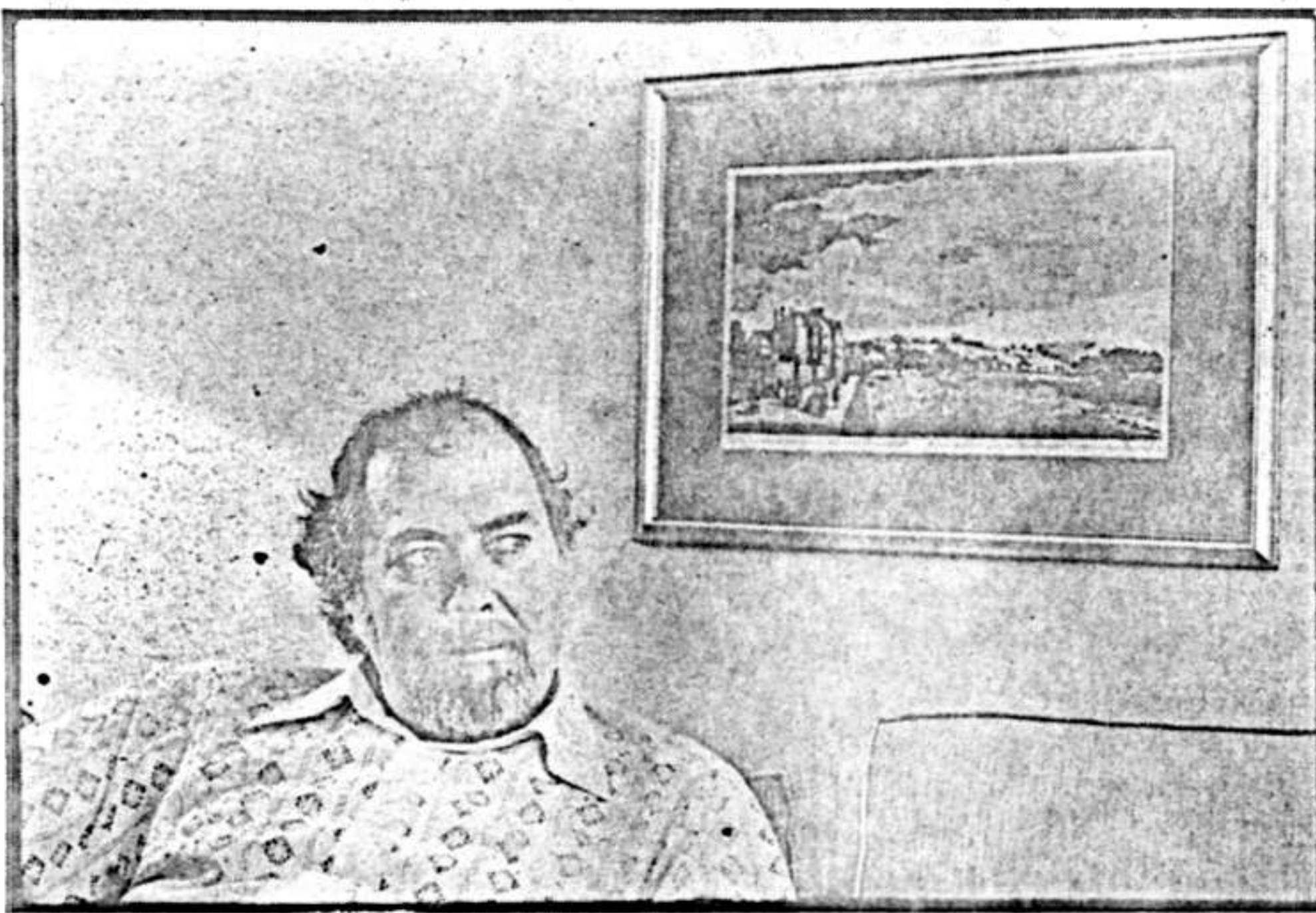
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attributed also to a very oblique relationship to his own unconscious. In that context, where in Altman's dream of a movie does Altman himself appear? There does not seem to be a character in *3 Women* that corresponds to Altman. Is he then merely the *metteur-en-scene*, a modern equivalent of Pirandello's cynical stage manager in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*?

The production notes quote, presumably with Altman's approval, Carl Gustav Jung's 1923 comment on the subject of dreams: "This whole creation is essentially subjective, and the dream is the theatre where the dreamer is at once scene, actor, prompter, stage manager, author, audience, and critic." It is a provocative notion to divide directors in accordance with the predominance in their styles of Jungian or Freudian elements. Rainer Fassbinder recently confided to me that he was a Freudian. By contrast, Werner Herzog is more Jungian than Freudian. I would say that Bergman is more Freudian than Jungian whereas Altman is more Jungian than Freudian. At the moment let us say that we are talking about nothing more than a certain mystical emphasis on the collective unconscious among the Jungians, and a certain skepticism toward the claims of the group on the individual among the Freudians.

If one is looking for Fellini influences on Altman, comparable, let us say, to Barbara Harris's Gelsomina and Cabiria in *Nashville*, then one would have to look no further than the opening shots of a Palm Springs health spa for the aged in *3 Women*. There, where waiting mortality confronts watery medicine, our two young protagonists are introduced in their ill-fitting gray one-piece swimsuits as institutional handmaidens to elder gargoyles in a nightmarish reality possibly intended by Altman as a rebuke to Hollywood escapism. But the sustained lyricism of Altman's (and Chuck Rosher's) contemplative and ever moving camera, the curiously affecting meticulousness of Shelley Duvall's motions and expressions counterposed with the enchantingly child-like unabashedness of Sissy Spacek's mimicry and emotions, the moody sobriety of Gerald Busby's meditative score, and a spell cast by images that precede and transcend plot and character, all combine to transform potentially profane grotesquerie into sacred ritual. The old people have no color, no flavor, not even much consciousness. They are simply Old People in the penultimate stage of being near non-being. Once their condition has been established as a condition of all existence they recede into the background. Fellini's garish, ghastly health spa in *8½* passes from fantasy to satire to outright disgust through the informing sensibility of Fellini's alter ego, Marcello Mastroianni. By contrast, Altman's two female protagonists are so freaky in their own right that they neutralize the nightmarishness of old age. If Altman had never seen a Fellini film he might not have thought of or dreamed of the scene at all, but that is not the point. Altman does not merely imitate Fellini; he absorbs his effects and takes them in different directions. The end of *Brewster McCloud* is inspired by the end of *8½*, granted, but Altman confronts the irrevocability of death and disaster whereas Fellini does not.

Once Millie Lammoreaux and Pinky Rose begin interacting as psychological basket cases desperately in search of love and identity, the film shifts for long stretches into a kooky comedy of manners. At times Spacek and Duvall become the Laurel and Hardy of the spaced-out age as they turn every trivial detail of everyday living into a monumental challenge to their ingenuity. Millie takes Pinky under her wing and into her apartment, and there are low-grade Texas-twangy echoes of *All About Eve* when Pinky filches Millie's precious diary for a quick look-see. There is a subsequent suggestion of Pinky's taking over Millie's life, but again, the stakes seem ridiculously low: How much life has Millie to lose? If Pinky is first introduced to



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Robert Altman: the nightmare persists beyond the parameters of the film.

us as a social cipher, Millie is exposed again and again as a social leper. All her dates have ended in degradation, all her one-night stands have ended in oblivion, all her parties have ended in ridicule. It is not that Millie is surrounded by monsters. The people who mock her are shown doing so quietly and subtly and unostentatiously. They simply want to be rid of her, but she refuses to be rebuffed. Millie could be written off as a nerd were it not for something magical in Shelley Duvall's performance. Not since Katharine Hepburn's Alice Adams has a female character displayed as much wrong-headed generosity and courage as does Shelley Duvall's Millie. As I write these words I become aware that I am describing Millie as if she were a character on a printed page. But if I want to convey what *3 Women* really is as opposed to what it merely means, I could do worse than try to evoke Shelley Duvall's stride as she walks from one social Calvary to another. There is so much spiritual grace in that stride, and so much wisdom in Altman's decision to follow that stride to the ends of his scenario, that one is ennobled simply by witnessing the bonds of compassion between the director and his actress. Nothing else in *3 Women* is quite so overwhelming as the cumulative gallantry under stress of Shelley Duvall's Millie. It makes everything Fellini ever did with Giulietta Masina seem patronizing by comparison.

But I would not be doing justice to *3 Women* as a profoundly complex work of art if I did not try to cope with some of its other elements. The Third Woman (Janice Rule), for example, serves (mostly in silence) many allegorical roles, first and foremost as a pregnant earth mother, then as a muralist mocking the monstrosity of machismo, later as a wronged, vengeful wife, and finally as the founder of the matriarchy with which the film ends on a mystical note. Bodhi Wind's murals have struck some of my colleagues as unduly pretentious. I thought they were appropriately frenzied as a reaction against the massively philistine cosmos of the California desert, where six-shooters and motorcycles reigned supreme. The menacing murals thus provide a prophecy of the matriarchy to come, and thereby redeem the incidental satire of Americana from apparent aimlessness. I must confess that I was entertained by Altman's decrepit Dodge City, which serves as the final battleground of the sexes.

Advance reports of such lurid plot devices as an attempted suicide, an on-screen stillbirth, an off-screen murder may make the film seem dubious for the squeamish. I am among the most squeamish of spectators, and I found nothing disturbing or distasteful in *3 Women*. There were many eerie sequences in the film, but invariably they illuminated the human condition more than they obscured it. The sight of an old

couple (played by once-blacklisted Ruth Nelson and old director John Cromwell) grunting and groaning under the covers is at first disquieting, and then marvelously anarchic. And that mysteriously climactic shot of discarded rubber tires like so many rubber wombs delights the nihilist in me. *3 Women* may not be everyone's idea of what a woman's film should be, but Altman displays enough humor, tenderness, intelligence, and imagination to validate his vision both artistically and morally.

Nonetheless Altman does pay a price for trying to dispense with the convention of genre and narrative. His endings, for example, often seem arbitrary and artificial. To avoid the kiss-kiss at all costs he resorts to the bang-bang. Of course, a dream presents special problems. How does a dream end? Properly speaking, it does not end at all. It merely stops when the dreamer awakens. Unlike a conscious narrative, a dream lacks logic and coherence. Hitchcock's dreams generally end with the world at rest in a state of moral equilibrium as if the dreamer had awakened safely from a nightmare. With Altman the nightmare persists beyond the parameters of the film. He wants his audience above all to remain restless and unsettled. He is the sworn enemy of happy endings and comforting morals. His is an open-ended cinema in which anguish and anxiety flow freely back and forth between film and reality. Altman is like Renoir in letting his actors take him where they want to go, and also in knowing all the while that he will reach his ultimate destination just the same, but in a roundabout way.

Most people I have talked to cannot buy the last part of *3 Women*. It requires, they say, too great a leap of faith and too long a suspension of disbelief. What they don't say is that they secretly yearn for some humanist affirmation in a realistic framework, which would mean either a Philco Playhouse epiphany of sisterhood with Millie and Pinky walking off into the sunset together, or a clinical grand guignol in which Pinky obliterates Millie, body and soul. Altman dares to end *3 Women* with an idea rather than with a feeling. It is not entirely clear how he got to that idea; but I do not mind the ellipsis since its effect is to make Millie and Pinky and the third woman (suggestively named Willie) larger than life. I cannot even pretend to know at this point what Altman feels he has to atone for, but I am awed by his eventual elevation of Millie and Pinky from groundlings to goddesses. Thus, the design of the film makes it a noble work of art, whereas its detail makes it a scintillating entertainment.