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## SEVEN WOMEN

As befits the last film of an increasingly mysterious director, Seven Women is susceptible to many interpretations: it could be a warning against Oriental (or Red) barbarism, or a commentary on repressive religious community; it seems to be a broad examination of female nature, as well as a semi-abstract foreboding about threatened civilization, a frontier story, even if the hostiles are Chinese bandits and the setting is, unmistakably, a studio stockade with a painted backlot.

On the whole, I think the range of women is a gimmick, but one that allows Ford to detach his protagonists from the sentimentality <sup>with</sup> ~~aura~~ which he cushioned men. Dr Cartwright (Anne Bancroft) is nearly a man - not just in garb and weary toughness, but in her codes of realism, duty and candor. But whereas Ford could not endure seeing a man fail (e.g. Liberty Valance is killed), here the doctor's sacrifice for the other members of the mission is never rewarded. We do not know if bravery and duty will be enough. And whereas a hero might have turned the tables on the bandit chief, here the realist calmly takes her own life. Seven Women may use women more than it understands feminism, but it is free from the rhetoric of heroic survival and ready to face a frontier community that may not be worth saving. ~~The extra bleakness may come from the fact that we say "patriotic", not "matriotic".~~ It is a Ford Western mercifully without the romance of solitary men and boyish groups, a colder, less evasive vision because the <sup>Context</sup> ~~scene~~ is female. --

David Thomson

Directed by John Ford. Written by Janet Green and John McCormick, from the story Chinese Finale by Norah Lofts. Photographed by Joseph LaShell. With Anne Bancroft, Margaret Leighton, Sue Lyon, Flora Robson, Mildred Dunnock, Betty Field, Eddie Albert, Anna Lee (1966, 87 mins)