

the village VOICE

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VOICE DECEMBER 16, 1986

THREE AMIGOS! Directed by John Landis. Written by Steve Martin, Lorne Michaels, and Randy Newman. Produced by Martin, Michaels, and George Folsey Jr. Released by Orion.

CINDERELLA. A film by Ericka Beckman. At the Kitchen, December 13.

TYPHOON CLUB. Directed by Shinji Somai. Written by Yuji Kato. Produced by Tutomu Yamamoto. At the Public Theater, opening December 12.

The Mild Bunch

BY J. HOBERMAN

larly their knee-slapping, pelvis-thrusting trademark maneuver—and, throughout the film, their militant wimpiness is used to parody the macho ideal. Sauntering into the impossibly dangerous Cantina del Borracho, the three gringos get hopelessly bent on tequila and, mincing with a unison worthy of the Rockettes, perform a flirtatious vaudeville dance for a room full of dumbfounded bad hombres. The clash in presentational style is akin to Sylvester Stallone giving a boxing exposition on *Pee-wee's Playhouse*. The film makes you think again of the wonderfully revealing assertion in the *Top Gun* pressbook that the only professions worthy of a man are jet pilot, rock singer, movie star, and President of the United States.

The time is approaching for a full taxonomy of Reagan-era films. While some films are like Reaganism in that they flatter their public, thriving on the complacency and nostalgia of the current



Cinderella: how to act in the world

zeitgeist (everything from *Indiana Jones* to *The Decline and Fall of the American Empire*), others are more aggressive in aping either the Reagan social program (*An Officer and a Gentleman*) or its belligerent rhetoric (*Rambo*, *Iron Eagle*, *Heartbreak Ridge*, et al.). And then there are the films, preeminently *Ghostbusters*,

that appropriate the method of Reaganism itself. In this latter sociological category, *Three Amigos!* finds its niche.

As did the 'busters, the Amigos succeed because they don't subscribe to the actuality of the perilous scenarios in which they find themselves. They know the image is all. Life is only a movie—or should be. Shot in the arm, Martin petulantly demands to see the offending prop. ("Oh, great! Real bullets.") When it dawns on the Amigos what's really going on they begin to cry: "We're not gunfighters—we're movie stars." *Three Amigos!* gives us a vision of imperialism by mirrors—and this is what makes it so topical.

The Amigos perceive their South-of-the-Border escapades to be basically a show. Just like Ronald Reagan. According to *The New York Times*, when the president called Oliver North to comfort him last week, he "began the conversation by suggesting that the revelations of recent days would make a great movie." Right—and, in the context of American media politics, we're like those credulous peons who sat in church and thought the film was real.

Ericka Beckman makes films that are playful in the most literal sense. Brightly colored and cheerfully self-absorbed, they take their structure, rhythm, and imagery from games. *You the Better*, scandal of the 1983 New York Film Festival, was an inexplicable contest—half dodgeball, half roulette—staged inside an abstract slot machine. Although her new *Cinderella* (at the Kitchen this Saturday night along with the Bette Gordon sequence from a seven-director anthology, *The Seven Deadly Sins*) is somewhat more narrative, it still owes as much to pinball as Perrault.

Although no less fraught with psychodrama than Walt Disney's version, Beckman's drops the sibling rivalry and Oedipal underpinnings, boiling the material down to an enigmatic meditation on the nature of socialization. Cinderella's la-

bors are dirtier and more strenuous than housework: The film opens in a clanging, fiery forge where Cinderella works the bellows and is mysteriously rewarded when a green crinoline dress appears gift-wrapped on the hearth. Wearing the dress and a blonde wig (and looking hilariously like Kathleen Turner in *Peggy Sue Got Married*), Cinderella attends the ball. But despite the exhortations of an anthropomorphized clock, she fails to grasp the rules of the game, and after twelve the screen lights up with TILT!-like messages ("NOT HOME BY MIDNIGHT," "NOT WITH THE PRINCE").

Cinderella's education continues apace at a factory in which de Chirico-like robots assemble Cinderella dolls in green dresses. If the doll is her ego ideal, the factory suggest social programming and even the entertainment industry. (The green dress keeps turning into green discs.) Observing this process—a dazzling superimposition/model/animation combo—Cinderella discovers that "green is the currency" and resolves that "no dress will ever shelter me." By the end, Cinderella knows "just what to do." Once again in gown and wig, she dances with the faceless prince, runs away at midnight (correctly leaving her shoe), and wins the game hands down.

Vintage Beckman, *Cinderella* exhibits the filmmaker's characteristic use of ambiguous interior space, stutter-stop development, incantatory songs, and dreamlike condensation. (As usual, the cryptic plot tends to recede behind the ingenious effects.) But inventive as Beckman is, her films are too obsessive for mere formalism. In virtually every one, some young (usually female) individual learns, through mysterious trial and error, how to act in (or upon) the world. It's not surprising that the story of Cinderella would appeal to her; what's more remarkable is the lack of attention she's received from film theorists of feminist and psychoanalytic persuasions.