

Terrence Malick, Badlands (1973)

Major Credits:

Script: Terrence Malick

Cinematography: Brian Probyn, Tak Fujimoto, Stevan Lerner

Cast: Martin Sheen (Kit), Sissy Spacek (Holly), Warren Oates (Holly's father)

Background:

The film was independently produced and distributed by Warners.

Made when the director was still in his mid-twenties, "Badlands may be the most assured first film by an American since Citizen Kane" (David Thomson). The story is based on the real-life killing spree of Charles Starkweather and Caril Fugate in 1958. Both Sheen (who later played the lead role in Coppola's Apocalypse Now) and Spacek (who later won an Academy Award for her performance in Coalminer's Daughter) have praised Malick's direction and count their performances here among their very best work.

Malick, who was born in Waco, Texas, taught philosophy at M.I.T., and studied at the American Film Institute's Center for Advanced Studies, appears briefly in Badlands: he is the man with the blueprints who knocks on the rich man's door.

Cinematic Techniques:

Malick employs a number of devices to maintain a cool, distanced effect throughout the film:

1. voice-over - Holly speaks almost exclusively in cliches and platitudes ("Better to spend a week with one who loved me than years of loneliness," "Kit was the most trigger-happy person I'd ever met," "We lived in utter loneliness, neither here nor there"). Her commentary (which occurs at some time after the action depicted within the film) never explains, never cues our emotions, and seems only distantly related to the events themselves. At several points, she explicitly refers to her own detached perception of reality: "The world was like a faraway planet to which I could never return"; "In the distance, I saw a train making its way silently across the plain, like the caravan in The Adventures of Marco Polo."

2. Reinforcing the aural effect of the narration, much of the cinematography is done with a long lens, the telephoto shots flattening the image and distorting perspective. Thus, the "look" of the film has much the character of the protagonists' voices.

3. transitions - Malick uses rapid fades rather than straight cuts between scenes to emphasize spatial and temporal discontinuities. Sequences have a self-contained quality rather than being strongly linked to adjacent scenes.

4. Composition - Many shots are formally composed, like landscape paintings: Holly and Kit picnic under a tree by the river; Kit gazes at the horizon with rifle across his shoulders (a deliberate reference to James Dean in Giant); the long shot of the billboard against the blue sky. In these shots and many others, "The viewer sees vividly but always at a distance" (William Johnson).

5. acting style - the characters continually under-react, often substituting gesture (Kit's holding the door for the wounded Cato or for Holly as she gets into the Cadillac) and rehearsed behavior (the "suicide" record, Kit's preparations for his own capture) for authentic, spontaneous action. Note how the violence is presented almost as trivial rather than shocking, and how the love scenes are devoid of passion.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Does the film offer any psychological explanation for the characters' behavior? Does it make any judgment about the characters?

2. The film's title is suggestive. Does Badlands present any judgment of American society? Is there a political message conveyed in the film?