

Book Review: *Terrence Malick: Film and Philosophy*

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Volume 3.2 (2014) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2014.112 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

Abstract

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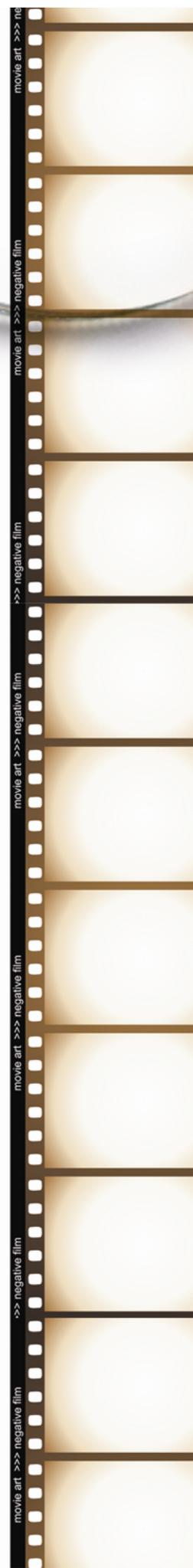
Keywords: American Film, philosophy, Malick



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Review of Thomas Deane Tucker and Stuart Kendall, eds., *Terrence Malick: Film and Philosophy*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. vii + 225 pp. ISBN 9781628928419, £26.95 (pbk)

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In May 2011, the cinephile circles took by surprise when Terrence Malick was awarded the *Palme d'Or* at the Cannes Film Festival for his then newest film *The Tree of Life* (2011). However, as the film turned out to be an extension of Malick's idiosyncratic style, even the highest of the highest critical success did not enable the director to obtain popular support. Prior to the win at Cannes, Malick's films, whilst unanimously acknowledged as staggeringly beautiful, had always divided film critics. On the one hand, these films displayed unusual formal choices, such as voice-over narration, that functioned differently to American films and thus contradicted well-known storytelling conventions. On the other, they represented a fascination with the natural environment and were richly layered with philosophical themes. This new anthology edited by Thomas Dean Tucker and Stuart Kendall predates the release of *The Tree of Life* and examines Malick's earlier work from a variety of philosophical perspectives. The editors argue that Malick's background in philosophy not only warrants philosophical questions into his oeuvre, but more importantly his "films offer privileged sites for this kind of inquiry" (p. 2). Whilst the introduction chapter aims to contextualize Malick's career as a philosopher and a filmmaker, rest of the individual chapters approach the films through a diverse range of philosophical frameworks, citing influential thinkers as varying as Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Schiller, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which in many ways testifies to the multifaceted and complex nature of the films. In this respect, the

volume succeeds as an example of multitudinous approach to the philosophy of film and broadly speaks to readers interested in the relationship between cinema and philosophy as well as the films of Terrence Malick.

The introduction establishes Malick as an introvert, reclusive filmmaker whose biographical details have so far been inadequately and ambiguously reported. As such, the editors aim to fill in this gap by offering a detailed “biographical itinerary” of Malick, setting out his initial experiences as a student of philosophy and then as a filmmaker and scriptwriter during the 1970s. Such an explicit interest in the personal life of a filmmaker, laden with remarks about his private life, raises methodological concerns as to whether the editors pursue an overtly auterist study of the filmmaker. Nevertheless, there are important details about Malick’s development as a filmmaker, for example his enrolment along with David Lynch and Paul Schrader at the American Film Institute’s Center for Advanced Film Studies, which, according to the editors, has functioned as “an incubator for the New Hollywood” (p. 5). The overall focus of this section, however, appears rather unbalanced as the editors pay more attention to Malick’s filmmaking career and less on his interest in philosophy. In fact, the whole anthology might have benefitted from a more in-depth examination of Malick’s work in philosophy; for instance, his relationship with his Harvard tutor Stanley Cavell, his abandoned project at Oxford with Gilbert Ryle, or his translation of and critical introduction to Heidegger’s *The Essence of Reasons*, which was published in 1969. Although some of these issues are briefly explored in Tucker’s chapter “Worlding the West: The Ontology of *Badlands*,” it remains cursory at best and could have been fleshed out further in the introduction chapter.

Having said that, the first essay in the collection, simultaneously the longest and, perhaps, the most ambitious, provides a sustained engagement with Heidegger's phenomenology. Penned by Steven Rybin, the chapter argues that Malick's "unconventional characters" and their striving efforts in "voicing meaning" (p.13) result in a kind of dialectical negotiation between the protagonists, their film world and its spectators, which altogether form a philosophical mode of viewing – an idea that is consistently picked up throughout the volume, especially in Russell Manning's chapter that examines Malick as a "dialectical film maker *par excellence*" (p. 167). Rybin, however, stresses that the films do not readily demonstrate concepts from Heidegger's writings, but rather the opposite; that Heideggerian concepts such as "world," "earth" and "striving" "form the philosophical ground from which our own indeterminate engagement with Malick's characters – and their own encounters with Malick's film worlds – might begin to take flight" (p. 19). Rybin's theoretical exposition of these concepts might appear difficult to follow, but his analyses of *Badlands* (1974) and *The New World* (2005) are particularly perceptive and proficient in the ways in which they illustrate his argument.

Of all the chapters, Thomas Wall's piece offers the most stimulating interpretation of Malick's cinema. Titled "*Rührender Achtung: Terrence Malick's Cinematic Neo-Modernity*," the chapter begins with a thought provoking claim: "best general commentary on the films of Terrence Malick is by Friedrich Schiller," particularly his essay "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" published in 1795-1796 (p. 58). In the remaining parts of the essay, Wall examines Malick's films through Schillerian concepts of naivety and *sentimentalisch* (more neatly translated as "subjective, reflective," according to the author), which, coupled with Malick's insistent portrayal of natural environment, gives rise to a mode of thinking that interrogates the

meaning of modernity, nature and divinity, or in the words of Wall, “a specific experience that predates any judgement, story, or history” (p. 60). Despite the fact that certain sections of his prose appear vague and can be improved in terms of conceptual clarity, Wall nevertheless sheds a new light over the ways in which audiences can fully engage with Malick’s films. The latter also applies to Matthew Evertson’s wonderful essay where he examines *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* (1978) in parallel to the novels and philosophical criticism of Wright Morris, whose literary works “explore the influence of America’s frontier mythology as it applies to characters caught up in the consumer culture of the 1950s” (p. 103). Evertson, therefore, offers a unique contextualization of Malick’s body of work in relation to American literary traditions and post-war cultural sensibilities.

On the whole, this edited volume presents original investigation of a filmmaker whose work has clearly intrigued, yet often also baffled audiences. Because Malick’s films are “filled with references, small and large, obvious and obtuse,” writes Stuart Kendall, they “might best be viewed as palimpsests in which a number of sources have been woven seamlessly together” to the extent that they have “remained relatively obscure to casual viewers and overlooked in the literature about Malick’s work” (p. 153). In this respect, this anthology not only contributes to the knowledge surrounding the complex and diversified philosophical references within Malick’s films up until *The Tree of Life*, but also paves an illuminating framework that can be used in comprehending his recently released, elusive works.