



# The Orchid in the Land of Garbage: an Ecocritique of Terrence Malick's Film *Badlands* (1973)

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**ABSTRACT** Through a figural analysis of Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973), this paper seeks to contribute to a more defined role of film criticism in contemporary environmental thought. The analysis focuses on the relation between humans and nature in *Badlands* and revolves around the ontological question of what it means to be free human beings in the world of nature, intended as a finite, temporal world. From an ecocritical perspective, *Badlands*' 1950s setting lends itself to a retrospective illumination of the forces that have contributed to the present problematic human-nature relation within "free" capitalist systems of thought and consumption. However, a figural analysis reveals that Malick's insistence on images of waste and death assumes a far more existential value, opening up possible deeper reflections beyond economic, social and political critiques.

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## Introduction

This paper draws on Walter Benjamin's ideas on film and allegory for a figural ecocritique of Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973). Malick's cinematic evocations of nature are analysed using an ontological perspective on film, showing that Malick's specific use of the film medium is linked to the problematised nature depicted in *Badlands*. Figuratively, *Badlands* operates as a disturbing reminder of the conditions of existence in finite material reality. In the narrative, Kit (Martin Sheen) and Holly (Sissy Spacek) apparently embody the rebellious and romantic figures representative of the American 1950s gender types; yet, a figural approach reveals that *Badlands* allegorises the existential human-nature relation in finitude, the irremediable tension between humans' desire to be free in an unfree, constrained world subject to finitude, death and/or change. This paper argues that Malick's use of the film medium to deal with issues of freedom in human-nature relations is an important point of interest for an ecocritical illumination of Malick's oeuvre and first long feature.

In using Walter Benjamin's ontological position on the role of the filmic image (its mode of being and becoming) in a contemporary, increasingly mediated culture, this article proposes a figural interpretation (or hermeneutics) of *Badlands* as a decisive movement away from social, political or psychoanalytic readings of film texts. It argues that a figural hermeneutics of *Badlands* works with the film's contingent, finite and material conditions of presentation—the allegorical *garbage* presented in the film's figural economy—and illuminates

its transformative nature. As argued, a Benjaminian approach to figures of nature in *Badlands* contributes to a more defined role of the film medium in Malick's oeuvre and, more generally, in ecocritical readings of film texts.

### **Green Things in *Badlands*?**

In an essay on Benjamin's contribution to contemporary environmental criticism, Catriona Sandilands points to the indissoluble link between detritus and progress in Benjamin's conception of bourgeois history. For Benjamin, the product of human efforts, no matter how noble in intent, such as art, literature, philosophy and indeed film, is (inevitably) the production of fragments and detritus that keeps piling up before Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*.<sup>1</sup> For Sandilands, "Benjamin[']s work] suggests that we begin an ecocritical project not with the natures that capitalism currently [aestheticizes,] celebrates and markets, but with those it has discarded along the way."<sup>2</sup> In taking Benjamin's writing seriously, Sandilands concludes:

... we are compelled to consider modes of writing in which *possibilities for the new are blasted from the decaying ruins of the present*. Such a task requires to look seriously at the green things in the garbage as garbage themselves, for in illuminating them we might find a nature that is not an apology for its own exploitation [emphasis added].<sup>3</sup>

Sandilands asks poignant questions that "lie at the heart of any discussion on the role of environmental criticism in (and against) capitalist cultural formations."<sup>4</sup> In adopting such an ecocritical approach, "discarded natures," garbage, detritus and death are everywhere in *Badlands*. Kit is a garbage man, introduced in the narrative on the garbage truck that disrupts and intrudes on the quiet alleys of Fort Dupree as well as Holly's little-town life. As further discussed in this article, *Badlands*' figurations of garbage are interpreted as a goldmine of debris from the 1950's nascent American dream open to "ecocritical gleaning," or a radical transformation of their being in time.

### **Terrence Malick's *Badlands***

*Badlands* is the story of an outlaw couple, retrospectively narrated with voiceovers by Holly Sargis (Sissy Spacek), a 1950's Midwestern small-town, middle-class girl. In the narrative, Holly falls in love and follows a young working class man, Kit (Martin Sheen), from South Dakota to

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Concepts of History," in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* Vol. 2, Part 2, 1931-1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), 392.

<sup>2</sup> Catriona Sandilands, "Green Things in the Garbage: Ecocritical Gleaning in Walter Benjamin's 'Arcades'," in *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, ed. Alex Goodbody and Kate Rigby (London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Sandilands, "Green Things," 40.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 37. For Sandilands, the "discarded natures" of human history can be an ideal terrain of ecocritical interpretation; they are in fact "green things" (with potential for transformation) insofar as critical work acknowledges that "the new possibilities" are still "garbage themselves" (that is, finite, temporal and material phenomena of human history operating within—and against—bourgeois cultural formations).

the badlands in Montana. During their journey and love story, Kit kills Holly's father, burns down her middle-class house, takes her to a tree house in the forest near a river, and shoots three bounty hunters, a friend and a young couple. When Holly surrenders to the police, Kit is left alone for the final phases of his unfulfilled journey and rather theatrical capture.

Contrary to most Hollywood films, Malick's first film does not convey pathos. Indeed, *Badlands* is a startlingly unusual American film and is the only film to date on which the director Terrence Malick has given public comment. In one of two remarkably similar interviews offered in the 1970s, Malick says:

I don't think that the film is cold. There is a certain warmth to it. I was very worried that people might say the film is soulless, because I admire [Elia] Kazan, [George] Stevens and [Arthur] Penn and scenes of great emotions. But to openly express your emotions you have to have great maturity, which is something my characters don't have.<sup>5</sup>

According to Peter Biskind, Malick belongs to the second wave of New Hollywood's directors, in what he terms "the film school generation" and includes "[Martin] Scorsese, [Steven] Spielberg, George Lucas, John Milius, Paul Shrader, Brian De Palma."<sup>6</sup> But despite the generational parallel with Malick's contemporary American film directors and despite the fact that Kit openly dresses, smokes and behaves like James Dean—an iconic figure in both Kazan's *East of Eden* (1955) and Stevens' *Giant* (1956)—Malick's *Badlands* shares very little in common with its contemporaries or predecessors. As Morrison and Schur observe:

What marks *Badlands* as so decisive a break from movies that came before it is ... the quality of its detachment. The line of films it culminates deals to varying degrees in irony, satire, or parody, but *Badlands* is just about alone among them in articulating some sense of the link between the characters' alienation and its own attitudes of ironic detachment.<sup>7</sup>

Critical readings of the film almost unanimously point to the disturbing lack of empathy Kit and Holly show towards their victims, and the lack of a clear psychological motivation driving their behaviours. The storyline of *Badlands* is loosely based on an historical outlaw couple (the spree killer Charles Starkweather and his girlfriend Caril Ann Fugate who killed eleven people in two months, between December 1957 and January 1958), and is reminiscent of the other famous outlaw couple in American history, the 1930's Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow. Indeed, *Badlands'* opening sequence evokes Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), a homage also acknowledged in the final title sequence of the film, to the point that, as Lloyd Michaels points out, "any critical assessment of *Badlands* must take into account the enormous critical and cultural impact of its predecessor."<sup>8</sup> But the outlaw couple of *Badlands* remains strangely distant from viewers. For William Johnson, this distancing is achieved by the film's distinctive stylistic features, such as the lack of subjective views, the use of telephoto lenses, long shots and the rapid fades and cuts. Johnson notes, "the camera is never overtly subjective: while we

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<sup>5</sup> Malick in Lloyd Michaels, *Terrence Malick* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 111.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 15-16.

<sup>7</sup> James Morrison and Thomas Schur, *The Films of Terrence Malick* (Westport: Praeger, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Michaels, *Terrence Malick*, 21.

share in Kit's and Holly's way of seeing the world, we remain outside them. In fact, *they* form part of the phenomena that challenges *us*.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Jonathan Bignell notes that, "distancing happens at the level of the shot, the sequence and the structure of narration."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, there is a circular structure in the events that contributes to a sense of failure, lack of accomplishment, and inevitable return to the initial conditions of presentation. As Neil Campbell notes, "dreams of escape are transformed into captivity, conformity and celebrity."<sup>11</sup> Why, then, unlike Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and despite the potential for a story of great pathos, does Malick choose to remain at a distance rather than engage emotionally or empathetically with his characters?

In his rare interview, Malick says, "I wanted to create a fairy tale quality;" and later adds, "[i]n a fairy tale, you shouldn't interfere with a story that follows its own logic."<sup>12</sup> As Michaels observes, in his only two interviews Malick seems to have "rehearsed the commentary he wished to be disseminated about his life and first film."<sup>13</sup> Thus, Malick's remarkable reticence in giving public interviews is interpreted as a distinctive feature of his way of doing cinema, of its poetics away from conceptions of the director as *auteur* or celebrity. Malick's comments on the fairy-tale quality of *Badlands* can be extended to his later films. As Adrian Martin suggests, every Terrence Malick's film is an experience "demanding its witnesses and its testament."<sup>14</sup> Malick does not impose authorial views, categories or interpretive frameworks to his films, and instead allows the films' distinctive stylistic features and figurations to speak for themselves, calling for a renewed act of interpretation at each viewing.

### ***Badlands'* "Fairy-Tale" Voiceovers**

A distinctive element of Malick's films is the peculiar use of the voiceover narration technique. In *Badlands*, Holly's retrospective narration never fully explains, extends or frames the images. Steven Rybin maintains that Malick's use of the narrator resembles storytelling in a "Benjaminian sense." In framing his reading of Linda's narration in *Days of Heaven* (Linda Metz), Rybin refers to Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" and notes: "[s]torytelling in a Benjaminian sense, marks the transmission of experience, with the listener having an equal stake in the constitution of a story's significance."<sup>15</sup> In *Badlands* there is a clear disjunction between images and voices, at times schizophrenic in its complete emotional detachment from

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<sup>9</sup> William Johnson, "'Badlands'. Terrence Malick," *Film Quarterly*, no. 3 (1974): 43-46.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Bignell, "From Detail to Meaning: 'Badlands' and Cinematic Articulation," in *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film*, ed. John Gibbs and Douglas Pye (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 43.

<sup>11</sup> Neil Campbell, "The Highway Kind: 'Badlands', Youth, Space and the Road," in *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, ed. Hannah Patterson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 41.

<sup>12</sup> Michaels, *Terrence Malick*, 112.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>14</sup> Adrian Martin, "Approaching 'the New World'," in *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, ed. Hannah Patterson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 220.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Rybin, *Terrence Malick and the Thought of Film* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 92.

the images presented. This is what Michaels terms Holly's "incomprehensible non-sequiturs,"<sup>16</sup> such as when she finds the dead body of Cato (Raymond Bieri), and the voiceover remarks, "[s]uddenly, I was thrown into a state of shock," but then goes on saying, "Kit was the most trigger happy person I'd ever met. He claimed that as long as you're playing for keeps and the law is coming at ya, it's considered OK to shoot all witnesses." As Bignell notes, Holly's narration "requires ... a spectator engaged in trying out a number of possible routes through the film;"<sup>17</sup> but Holly's voiceovers resist linear, logical or causal readings of the events narrated and displayed.<sup>18</sup> In the gap between Holly's clichéd phraseology and Kit's puerile and self-affirming violence the viewer is called to an act of interpretation.

In this, *Badlands* is, indeed, an exemplary tale or an allegorical parable of sorts that *needs* interpretation. Michaels notes that the film displays a series of motifs and poetic couplings that are strangely devoid of symbolic repercussions in the lives of the characters:

Two dances ("Love is Strange" and "A Blossom Fell"), two testaments (the record left at the fire and the Dictaphone message at the rich man's house), two boxes of relics (one sent aloft and the other buried), two white hats (Holly's father's at the billboard and the rich man's Panama, which Kit appropriates) ... In most narratives, such repetitions serve as markers for critical changes in the characters and their circumstances ... however, these motifs seem to measure only the director's sensibility and say nothing about any heightened consciousness in the two protagonists.<sup>19</sup>

These series of repetitions, for Michaels, do not refer to transcendental realities or symbolic meanings in the characters' narrative trajectory; they are not symbols at all. Malick deliberately frustrates symbolic readings, undermines them with the strangeness of his protagonists, the gratuitous, awkward and quixotic violence of Kit's behaviour and the almost nonsensical narration of Holly's voiceovers. Malick's film leaves the spectator in a liminal space of suspension. While domesticity, law and order are restored (Holly will marry her lawyer's son and Kit will die in the electric chair), and this is all in line with the generic conventions and social function of the Hollywood road movie,<sup>20</sup> *Badlands* remains ultimately incomprehensible, leaving viewers thinking about what it all means. Yet, as Malick observes, "there is a certain warmth to [*Badlands*]," a warmth that this article argues is located in the film's deep questioning of human's and not-only-human's conditions of existence and freedom.

<sup>16</sup> Michaels, *Terrence Malick*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Bignell, "From Detail," 49.

<sup>18</sup> For example, the declared loss of her mother in Holly's voiced backstory in the initial, overtly ambiguous opening sequences of the film (showing Holly on the bed with her dog), does not seem to justify her apathetic acceptance of Kit's behaviour, her monotone and her utterly unconvincing performance of teenage romances ("I sensed that my destiny now lay with Kit" / "He was handsomer than anybody I'd ever met, he looked just like James Dean" / "Our time with each other was limited and each lived for the precious hours when he or she could be with the other, away from all the cares of the world"). When Nat King Cole's music accompanying the couple's last dance in the deserted badlands tells the viewer "the dream has ended," the viewer wonders what dream, exactly, as the audiovisual narrative of the young rebellious couple is depicted in tones far from any existing model of idealised romance, including Holly's popular narrative style.

<sup>19</sup> Michaels, *Terrence Malick*, 28-29.

<sup>20</sup> Campbell, "The Highway Kind."

### Freedom in *Badlands*

In *Badlands*, Kit's blind and puerile pursuit of "freedom" is inscribed within a capitalistic dream and fantasy. The constraints of the Midwestern 1950's gender roles are in fact re-enacted and imitated in the forest. As Holly, in overvoice, almost comically observes in the forest: "We had our bad moments, like any couple. Kit accused me of only being along for the ride, while at times I wish he'd fall in the river and drown, so I could watch. Mostly though, we got along fine and stayed in love." Kit's fantasies and blind pursuit of freedom lead him to a cheap imitation of conservative values.<sup>21</sup> The "new life" Kit has in mind reproduces the sense of closed entrapment in the same social values he figuratively burnt down and left behind in Holly's paternal house, when Holly's narration remarks: "Kit made me get my books from school, so I wouldn't fall behind. We'd be starting a new life, he said." As Malick's quoted interview suggests, indeed, Kit and Holly's characters do not show maturity; as mimes, Kit and Holly do behave like children. In the forest and in the badlands, Holly mimics the role of the 1950's housewife,<sup>22</sup> and Kit takes on that of the patriarchal provider and defender, although in a strange, childlike fashion. Holly seems to play when she wears curlers and puts make-up on in the forest; similarly, Kit seems to play war games.<sup>23</sup> A figural approach to *Badlands'* characters reveals the paradoxical consequences of pursuing freedom within capitalist systems of consumption in a "natural" state of mimicry.

The ultimate freedom, for Kit, is complete adherence to the system that regulates and paradoxically prevents it from happening. In this view, the white Panama hat that Kit steals from the rich man's (John Carter) house and wears in the third act of the film, exceeds its symbolic meaning as a sign of patriarchy and power. Campbell notes Kit's "increasingly 'fatherly' attitudes and comments," and even "his adoption of a white Panama hat"<sup>24</sup> as a sign of the father. However, in following this figural motif, there are two other important "hat" scenes that should be considered in *Badlands*: the first after Kit's capture, when the Sheriff throws Kit's white Panama hat out of the police car as a sign of victory of the state, the ultimate patriarchal power, over the individual;<sup>25</sup> and the second in the very final sequence of the film, in the airplane that will take Holly and Kit back to South Dakota. In the airplane scene, Kit's attention is fixed on the military hat in the Trooper's lap, and he asks: "Where'd you get that?"/ "State" / "Boy, I'd like to buy me one of those"/ "You're quite an individual, Kit" / "Do you think they'll take that into consideration?" Kit's ultimate goal is the attainment of individual

<sup>21</sup> An example of this modeling of values is when Kit records his pedagogic speech at the rich man's house: "Listen to your parents and teachers. They got a line on most things. Try to keep an open mind. Consider the minority opinion, but try to get along with the majority of opinion once it's accepted."

<sup>22</sup> For a gender analysis of Holly as embodiment of the 1950's female adolescent and consumer of 1950's popular culture, see Anne Latto, *Innocents Abroad: the Young Woman's Voice in Badlands and Days of Heaven*, ed. Hannah Patterson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 91-94.

<sup>23</sup> This process can be understood in terms of Benjamin's ideas on mimicry presented in "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty." For Benjamin, "Nature produces similarities; one need only think of mimicry" (See Jennings, Eilan and Smith, eds., *Walter Benjamin* Vol. 2 Part 2, 694, 720). Following Benjamin's ideas, Kit and Holly are interpreted here in a "natural" state of being.

<sup>24</sup> Campbell, "The Highway Kind," 45.

<sup>25</sup> This important moment is shown through a dedicated external shot, with the hat rolling along the road before the editing cuts back into the car's interior.

absolute freedom and power, the freedom and power that in the narrative only pertains to the state. In his impossible pursuit, Kit literally imitates ideals of self-affirmation. Even in captivity Kit seeks the power of the state through a desire “to buy” the hat as a symbol of state authority. Indeed, Kit is admired and celebrated because he ironically (and tragically) plays out the same values of freedom and self-affirming choices at others’ expenses (other people, countries or species) that tragically define capitalist ideals of “freedom” put into practice. Nevertheless, while both Holly and Kit’s characters can be deconstructed as consumers and products of the nascent individualist-capitalist American milieu, a figural approach to *Badlands* can open up the film to existential and ontological readings that exceed political and social critiques.

### **The Sense of Existential Entrapment in *Badlands***

The visual imagery of *Badlands* conveys a sense of existential enclosure and entrapment. Images of confinement pervade the whole narrative:

... cages, pens and enclosures that symbolize Kit and Holly’s limited [encoded and defined] lives ... from the circling shots around her bed in the opening scene, to his work at the feed lot penning cattle, to the traps and cages that echo through the film, including one taken from the father’s house and another at Cato’s where he also keeps a spider in a bottle.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, reflected images on mirrors at crucial turning points in the narrative are a recurrent motif in *Badlands*. The reflected image of Holly’s father as Kit is taking Holly’s possessions from her bedroom; Holly’s reflected image as she puts make-up on in the forest, just before Kit senses the bounty hunters’ arrival; Cato, Kit’s former colleague and friend, looking at himself in a mirror as he is slowly dying (after Kit shoots him in the stomach); and, finally, Kit looking at himself in the rear view mirror and adjusting his hair “like James Dean” as if to get ready for the final phases of his staged and theatrical capture.<sup>27</sup> Here, Kit’s need to look at himself in the mirror echoes his desire to fix and give meaning to important events of his life (such as when he suggests to Holly that they “crush their hands” with a stone to remember the day they first made love under a tree, or when he builds a small rock cairn where the police will arrest him). Rybin detects a motif of entropy throughout *Badlands* and suggests that Kit’s need to leave traces—recordings and time capsules, for instance, but also the trail of violence and murders—signify Kit’s “failure to make meaning through contingent encounters with other objects and subjects.”<sup>28</sup> In this light, for Rybin, Cato “looks at himself in the mirror as if to capture just one more glimpse of his subjecthood before it slips away,” before death transforms him into mere “object.”<sup>29</sup> In *Badlands* entropy, death and garbage are everywhere as a figuration of finitude and material conditions of existence. But in his discussion on Cato’s reflection and objectification through death, Rybin adds, “it is worth remembering that the mirror is often

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<sup>26</sup> Campbell, “The Highway Kind,” 42.

<sup>27</sup> Kit’s capture is theatrical in the sense that it is prepared and waited for—he adjusts his hair, purposefully shoots the car’s tyre, builds a little rock cairn, and even checks his wrist pulse as he waits for the police to come and arrest him.

<sup>28</sup> Rybin, *Terrence Malick*, 56.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

used as a metaphor for film itself."<sup>30</sup> Moving from Rybin's insight, Malick's use of the film medium will be discussed more fully through Benjamin's ontological position on film in the last section of this paper, but for the moment, it is important to stress that despite the undeniable motif of death and ruin that runs throughout the film, Malick adopts a unique language and register beyond generic conventions, between the realistic and surrealistic, the believable and unbelievable. Indeed, Malick's audiovisual language in *Badlands* complicates the process of ideological identification, making it virtually impossible.

The sick catfish motif is exemplary in this respect. The bowl with the catfish appears on the windowsill in the initial sequences with Holly in her bedroom and is then repeated and insisted upon later in the narrative. However, Holly's monotone voiceover strikes the viewer/listener as she normalises and, at the same time, complicates any linear understanding of the images presented. In a later sequence the viewer sees a close-up of the "sick" fish in the all-too-small fish bowl, then a low-angle shot of Holly with a pair of kitchen gloves throwing the fish in the vegetable garden patch (for the viewer to see it is still alive and suffering). Holly's retrospective voiceover says: "The whole time, the only thing I did wrong was throwing out my fish when he got sick. Later I got a new one, but this incident kept on bothering me and I turned to Kit." The almost surreal quality of the sequence is clear when the montage cuts to Kit doing "strange things" as well (Kit in the cattle pen walking up and down a dead animal), and then to the "suffering catfish" motif again. This time, the shot moves from a medium close-up of Kit in Holly's bed (with an empty look and a semi-open mouth, his head slightly reclined), to a medium long shot, revealing the catfish beside him, on the bedside table, still alive and agonising, and Holly's voiceover saying: "[a]nd as he [Kit] lay in bed, in the middle of the night, he always heard a noise like somebody was holding a seashell against his ear. And sometimes he'd see me coming toward him in beautiful white robes, and I'd put my cold hand on his forehead." In this scene, Holly is associated with coldness and death and Kit is depicted as trapped in her bed. The motif of entrapment that pervades the film's imagery is repeated and insisted upon, but it assumes a far more existential sense in its allegorical mode. These allegorical elements and the film's detached irony<sup>31</sup> point to the fairy-tale quality of the film and its figural value.

### **A Figural Approach to Malick's *Badlands***

In her book on figural film criticism, Nicole Brenez suggests that the "figural logic" of the film text considers "the figural economy" —the relation among its figural elements—"as many questions."<sup>32</sup> In adopting Brenez's terminology, the concern here is demonstrating that the

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<sup>30</sup> Rybin, *Terrence Malick*, 64. Here, Rybin arguably refers to the use of Lacan's "mirror stage" ideas in film theory (see Christian Metz; Jean-Louis Baudry). Using Lacan's psychoanalytic insights, the screen is compared to the mirror's ability to split the subject into its own object as it recognises and identifies with the reality projected on the screen/mirror. In this split, the spectator identifies with an objectified version of reality, and, in the case of film, with the symbolic/ideological order of the film's specific language and register.

<sup>31</sup> Morrison and Schur, *The Films of Terrence Malick*.

<sup>32</sup> Nicole Brenez, *De La Figure En General Et Du Corps En Particulier: L'invention Figurative Au Cinema* (Paris: De Boeck Universite, 1998), 10-17.



“figural economy” of *Badlands* points to a material ontology that resists symbolic readings. In reading the figural economy of the film as many questions, this article asks how certain motifs present in characters and *mise-en-scène* relate or illuminate the nature of being and the question of freedom in finitude. In the figural logic of the film, Kit’s character combs his hair “like James Dean,” but what is the recognisable existential condition that “James Dean” embodies and allegorically speaks about? In broad terms, James Dean’s characters (*East of Eden* and *Rebel without a Cause*) reaffirm and reinforce the ideology they reacted against.<sup>33</sup> This view can arguably be extended to historical figures (popularised by media attention) such as “Bonnie and Clyde” and Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate. Kit as “James Dean” in *Badlands* embodies the rebellious and tragic figure of teenage disillusionment that actually longs for recognition in an equally ideological system and order of things. Nevertheless, the analysis of *Badlands*’ figural economy moves beyond political critique.

In pursuing the film’s figurations, one of the most striking images of *Badlands*’ figural economy is the big billboard that Mr. Sargis, Holly’s father (Warren Oates) is painting in the vastness and nothingness of its surroundings. In the scene, and following the conventions of patriarchy, a frustrated Kit asks Holly’s father permission to see his daughter. The father wears a white Panama hat and low camera angles show him in a dominant position compared to Kit. Malick’s direction emphasises the importance of the billboard with an extreme long shot that lingers on the screen at the end of the dialogue scene. The advertisement operates as a sign of the 1950’s capitalistic dream, and Malick’s film openly and ironically highlights its brutality masked behind the “friendly” appearance of a commodified idea of nature and happiness. On the painting, domesticated nature—fish in a pond, chickens, horses, an idealised farm, ordered trees—and a smiling man are displayed under the flying banner advertising “Kauzer’s feed and grains.” The artificial and almost disturbing effect of the advertisement is heightened by the painting’s stylistic features, such as its flat perspective and prevalence of primary colours, but most importantly by the fact that the viewer has already experienced, in previous scenes, the otherwise multifaceted and complex brutality of the advertisement’s reality: the real life livestock feed in modes of mass production, with images of unattended sick and dying cattle and, early in the film, Kit gratuitously kicking one of the animals that he just fed.

The advertisement points to the *inherently commodified idea of nature* that produces affect and generates abstract thoughts of harmony and “happiness” with nature in capitalist modes of production.<sup>34</sup> The billboard emerges from the void of its surroundings, not a road, not a tree, just Mr. Sargis’ Jeep, sky, a few clouds, and a stretch of fields lying fallow. Figuratively, the fields are an equally important and insisted-upon visual element. This scene frames the father as the absolute demiurge of the world he is creating. The artificial billboard surrounded by the vast sky and the open plains operate as a figural reminder that dominant conditions of existence are enframed within a constructed, artificial world; but a figural reading

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<sup>33</sup> Claudia Springer, *James Dean Transfigured: The Many Faces of Rebel Iconography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> The author borrows the ontological approach to marketed realities from Gay Hawkins. In particular, Hawkins refers to the creation of affective powers as “ontological interference” in “Branding Water: The Role of Hydrogeology and the French State in the Evolution of Evian,” a paper given at the 44<sup>th</sup> Annual Symposium of the Australian Academy of the Humanities—Environmental Humanities: the Question of Nature at the University of Queensland in November 2013.

of Malick's characters also suggests that reacting against those conditions only reinforces the dominant constructed world. In this reading, the billboard and the fallow field suggest that the existential relation of man and nature is *empty* and open to new and other possibilities in finitude. This vision is supported by the "figural hermeneutics" of specific scenes of *Badlands* that are presented in the last part of this paper.

### Figural Hermeneutics

Figural film analysis is presented here as a hermeneutical work—that is, a work of textual reading or interpretation<sup>35</sup>—that elides the division between subject/viewer and object/film and accounts for the "excess" of the film's own "appearance."<sup>36</sup> The figural approach to artistic practices is not new.<sup>37</sup> However, a figural approach to film analysis is a relatively new development in film studies.<sup>38</sup> This paper posits figural hermeneutics as a suitable method of analysis in ecocritical readings of film texts. A figural hermeneutics of *Badlands* looks at the visual shapes and forms that are evoked, organised and used in the film's world or diegesis through objects, visual style, characters and artistic tropes, and contends that certain gestures that recur in visual, creative practices exist beyond intertextuality and exceed narrative teleology, creative intentions and economic frameworks of production. This textual recurrence of figural gestures deserves critical attention beyond symbolic, religious and sacred interpretations.

In using a figural hermeneutics, the figural economy of Malick's *Badlands* draws on a specific figural logic that operates as an ontological questioning of humans in relation to freedom (with ecological implications). Interpretive meaning is produced in the singular interaction between the film and the viewer, with new interpretive possibilities produced and *released* from the film's own figurations at the time of each viewing. Routt writes, "Figuration ...

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<sup>35</sup> Hermeneutics is concerned with interpretation or the reading of the message that is the text—its telling of its conditions of signification. The conditions of signification are read *through* the singular text and not presupposed as determining context. A hermeneutics of film texts breaks the division between subject (viewer) and object (film). In effect, the original text and the reading partake in a co-becoming of the conditions of signification, which is always open to new readings and new horizons of interpretation. For a general discussion of hermeneutics, see Kurt Mueller-Vommer, ed., *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

<sup>36</sup> Warwick Mules, "Mise-En-Scene and the Figural: A Reading of Terrence Malick's 'Tree of Life'," *The Cine-Files* 4, Special Issue (2013): 1-19.

<sup>37</sup> The figural or figurative approach entails the study of plastic forms and shapes in art. The concept has obvious connections to the visual arts and has received philosophical attention from Plato. Both Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard engage with the figural discourse referring to the figural as a non-dialectical philosophical line of enquiry; both Deleuze and Lyotard refer to the visible as the starting point of this enquiry, giving precedence to artistic practices rather than abstract philosophy, forms rather than ideas (a concrete "reversal of Platonism" in Deleuze's words).

<sup>38</sup> Among film scholars dealing with the figural approach to film analysis, see especially Nicole Brenez, Dudley Andrew, D. N. Rodowick, William Routt, Adrian Martin and Warwick Mules.

is the common currency of experience."<sup>39</sup> In this, figural hermeneutics is an ontological rather than epistemological approach to film analysis: it contributes to the coming into being of the film's figurations as a possibility enacted in the reading itself, and not as a fixed truth to be rediscovered. Indeed, the film comes into being in the process of its own "appearing," and figural interpretation is a "capacity" enabled by the excess<sup>40</sup> of the film's material conditions of signification:

[w]e access this capacity by refusing to see the film's *mise-en-scène* in terms of the actors' or characters' subjective vision or the cognitive capacity of the viewer, and rather allow the film to guide us into its own vision: its own appearing (*erscheinen*) that reveals a figuration leading "otherwise" as a possibility of human being insofar as we partake of what the film shows as also part of our own possibilities.<sup>41</sup>

Under such a figural approach, Kit and Holly's walk in Fort Dupree's central streets at the beginning of their love story assumes particular relevance for this viewer and for an interpretation of *Badlands*' figural logic (its ontological questioning of human freedom).

In the long track shot that will be considered here, a series of framed moments appear and happen in the film's unfolding world; they resonate with and gesture towards the film's past and future events. In the shot, Kit and Holly walk along the shopping windows of the main street: Kit kicks a piece of garbage, rather conservatively commenting that if everybody threw garbage (as he did in the film's initial sequences) "the whole town would be a mess." Here, the shop windows in the *mise-en-scène* prefigure Kit and Holly's unfulfilled journey. Behind the shop windows the viewer sees: dolls (signifying the childhood Holly is leaving behind and the dolls that will burn in Holly's house); a bottle shop (signifying the legalised escapism that the state offers through regulated alcohol consumption, and arguably reminiscent of the escapist social function of Hollywood's road movie genre itself); then a café and an anonymous "shoppe" sign with a very peculiar poster under it, probably an advertisement (there is a small blue and red corporate logo of sorts on the poster, suggesting it is an advertisement). The poster on the window shows a striking image of classic idyllic nature<sup>42</sup> with two human figures under

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<sup>39</sup> William D. Routt, "For Criticism, Parts 1 and 2: A Review of Nicole Brenez 'De La Figure En General Et Du Corps En Particulier: L'invention Figurative Au Cinema'," *Screening the Past* (2000) <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/shorts/reviews/rev0300/wr1br9a.htm>, 6.

<sup>40</sup> The figural logic of a film certainly draws from, but at the same time exceeds, creative intentions and economic frameworks of production. The figural economy of Malick's films (the exchange between the gestures that the film enacts) articulates a discourse that is obliquely presented between and beyond the films' narrative elements. For a discussion on this "excess" in films see Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph*, (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1994). Gunning writes "in film this excess of mimesis over meaning appears automatically with the photographic image ... even Edison's films are crowded with the excess of photographic reality," 17-18.

<sup>41</sup> Warwick Mules, "The Future at Odds with the Past: Journey Through the Ruins of Memory in Alkinos Tsilimodos's 'Tom White'," in *Millennial Cinema: Memory in Global Film*, eds., Amresh Sinha and Terence McSweeney (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> Classic images of idealised nature are insisted upon in the figural economy of the film. The poster identified here is not dissimilar in style from the Maxfield Parrish painting that Kit will take from Holly's house and leave in the tree house in the forest.

a tree, near a river, and one of them is carrying wood. As with Mr. Sargi's billboard, the advertisement signifies a romanticised and idealised idea of nature that is inherently commodified, marketed and sold in capitalism; it also prefigures Holly and Kit's tree house in the forest.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the last shop window is a non-identified office (the men waiting outside and inside suggest it is an office offering some kind of service to the community). Behind the glass there is a man with a hat, who smokes and looks outside, rather lost in thought (the place is visually reminiscent of the employment agency seen earlier; it suggests enclosure and subjection to a predefined system and order of things beyond individual control).<sup>44</sup> These framed moments in the *mise-en-scène* do not belong to the causal teleology of the film and exceed the film's narrative elements.

Kit and Holly's walk and the series of shop windows behind them operate as an "immanent figuration" of their inescapable entrapment in material conditions of existence. An analysis of the figural logic of the film suggests that these visual motifs figure as the film's main questions, ontological problems and figural knots waiting to be untied, addressed or resolved; as such, they operate as *transformative potential* of the film's "immanent figuration:"

Figural [film] analysis is not concerned with the causal logic of narrative, but with transformations of figuration that produce the story world as a matrix of prefigured filmic material [...] The transformations seen in film are not narratives but exchanges of stored audiovisual material between anterior and posterior phases of an ongoing trajectory of becoming. This trajectory is not inside the narrative. Rather, it is the film as immanent figuration ... Embedded in this trajectory are myriad gestures, rhetorical expressions, theatrical devices, fetish objects and modes of visual display, which owe nothing to the narrative action. Rather they belong to a rhetorical scheme or 'system of figuration' ... of their enigmatic presence within and beyond the narrative.<sup>45</sup>

Kit and Holly are inscribed within a series of framed stills that allegorise their world (the commodified world they will never leave in spite of or even *because of* their awkward escape

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<sup>43</sup> The image also prefigures the "nice" place near the river where Kit and Holly play cards and make love (rather unsatisfactorily, as Holly's disappointed comments suggest: "Is that all there is to it?" "Gosh, what was everybody talking about?). In the "cards" moment, which comes first in the montage sequence, Kit and Holly are sitting under a tree, playing cards on a blanket. (HOLLY: What a nice place. KIT: (absorbed in game) Yeah, the tree makes it nice. HOLLY: And the flowers ... Let's not pick them. They're so nice. KIT: It's your play). Here, Kit's intellectual approach to the card game and "nature" operates as a sharp contrast to Holly's naïve, idyllic romanticism. Kit reminds Holly of the rules of the game; allegorically, it could be argued that Kit and Holly's two scenes under the tree suggest nature's subjection to "rules" of finitude. (Yet, the unsatisfactory love scene between Holly and Kit also suggests nature's *potential* and possibility of satisfaction, and *these figures'* inability to live in finitude beyond the rational and naïve approach to nature.) This line of argument will be extended in the last part of this paper.

<sup>44</sup> Images of men waiting populate the figural economy of *Badlands*; for example, there are men waiting (and one of them looking out of the window) in the employment agency where Kit goes after losing his job as a garbage man, and there are men waiting in the scene when Kit records his message in the "Private Recording Studio" booth with the smashed glass.

<sup>45</sup> Mules, "The Future at Odds," 140-141.

through “the planes of freedom” of the allegorical badlands). However, in its immanent figuration, the film *itself* opens up this “filmic material” to possible interpretive transformations. Films store “myriad gestures, rhetorical expressions, theatrical devices, fetish objects and modes of visual display”<sup>46</sup> open to figural analysis of their ontological questionings within and beyond their diegetic worlds. Indeed, interpreting and releasing recurring figural gestures from the films does not mean resolving or understanding them, but opening them up to possible, transient “constellations” of meaning. As argued in the final part of this paper, a Benjaminian perspective on figural hermeneutics can uncover a possible specific function of the film medium to deal with issues of human-nature relations in Malick’s *Badlands*. Under such a figural approach, *Badlands*’ figurations of nature work *with* the conditions of finitude obliquely presented in the figural logic of the film (the sense of entrapment in material and capitalist modes of being) and open them up to possible “ecocritical gleaning”<sup>47</sup> and transformations.

### Allegorical Nature in Films

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Benjamin claims that the reproduction of objects through modern technologies leads to a crisis, a “shattering” of the traditional way of conceiving the arts as capturing the “aura”— that true, original and unique moment in time enclosed in the “original” art object. Benjamin writes, “art has left the realm of the ‘beautiful semblance’ which, so far, had been taken to be the only sphere where art could thrive.”<sup>48</sup> For Benjamin, the advent of film and photography in modernity has profound consequences for modern human beings, because “in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his [her] own particular situation it reactivates the object reproduced.”<sup>49</sup> Benjamin’s approach to film is fluid and ever changing, subject to transformations and metamorphosis in time.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, for Benjamin the advent of film technology in modernity primed a profound and undetected process of destruction. In dissipating the aura (the ritualised presence of objects), films have started “the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.”<sup>51</sup> Films evoke, but at the same time transform and destroy myths and ideas *because* they give them material appearance. Myths, legends, religions, beautiful novels and imaginative stories *appear* and *move*; they become material, historical *phenomena*.<sup>52</sup> Benjamin notes:

<sup>46</sup> Mules, “The Future at Odds,” 140.

<sup>47</sup> Sandilands, “Green Things.”

<sup>48</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed., Hannah Arendt (Bungay, Suffolk: Fontana/Collins, 1973), 232.

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 223.

<sup>50</sup> Such fluidity opposes Kit’s awkward attempts to stop and fix salient moments in time through his time capsules and sepulchral art in *Badlands*.

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 223.

<sup>52</sup> Arendt’s introduction to the edited work *Illuminations* points to Benjamin’s fascination with the world as phenomenon and appearance: “this paradox, the wonder of appearance, was always at the center of all his concerns.” Arendt quotes the following words from Benjamin: “What seems paradoxical about everything that is justly called beautiful is the fact that it appears” (Arendt, *Illuminations*, 12). The paradox is that in appearing, and thus becoming phenomena, all beautiful things become subject to death: metaphorical or otherwise allegorical garbage, foretelling its dissolution.

In 1927 Abel Gance exclaimed enthusiastically: "Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films ... all legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of religion, and the very religions ... await their exposed resurrection, and the heroes crowd each other at the gate." Presumably without intending it, he issued an invitation to a far-reaching liquidation.<sup>53</sup>

In this, Benjamin's ideas on film assume a deeply ontological value. Films allegorise their own symbolic content; they deconstruct their attempts to transcend their material conditions of presentations, drawing themselves back to the material conditions from which they "speak."<sup>54</sup> While film technology destroys myths, dissipating the aura and intruding the "magic"<sup>55</sup> of artistic impressions and expressions, it also reveals the intrinsic illusion of *capturing* and fixing the aura's "magic:" the utter singularity of the moment, its wholeness and unity with the world and nature. Despite film's apparent mimetic power (the realism of the images produced), the reproducibility of the objectified world reminds viewers that the relationship between humans and nature is *always* mediated and "parted" from itself; language, film and photography all *enact* the irremediable gap between humans and nature.<sup>56</sup> The description or impression produced (in language, film or art) is always allegorically dead,<sup>57</sup> cut off from the unique, "auratic" moment of the impression. Films arguably crystallise this condition, making it very clear to see. Thus, following Benjamin the reproducibility of the objectified world operates as an allegory, as other-possible-saying of the world reproduced.<sup>58</sup> If on the one hand films

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<sup>53</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 223-234. Benjamin's essay cites Abel Gance, "Le Temps de l'Image est Venu," *L'Art cinématographique* 2, (1927): 94f.

<sup>54</sup> This can be understood in terms of language (figural and visual language included) "impart-ability." or ability to be there as a collapse of "saying" into the act of speaking itself. See Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's Abilities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 31-52. An allegorical approach to film takes into account the "impart-ability" of language. Language parts from itself and becomes something else. This something else is thereby removed from its source and calls for interpretation.

<sup>55</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 223.

<sup>56</sup> In his interpretation of Benjamin's work on language, Samuel Weber writes: "Human beings are thus the only living beings that are not entirely homogenous and whose *distance from language* remains the sign of this irremediable heterogeneity" [emphasis added] (Weber, *Benjamin's Abilities*, 45).

<sup>57</sup> For the "figural" connection between allegory and death ("dead" and objectified materiality), see Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 2009), 166. For the conceptual link between figural film analysis and Benjamin's theory of Allegory, see Mules' analysis of Alkinos Tsilimodo's *Tom White*. Mules writes: "As other-speaking, allegories are movements of figuration operating in the ruins of subjective experience opened to absolute possibility." (Mules, "The Future at Odds," 148). Mules points to the *contingency and materiality* of films' allegorical figurations and interpretations: "[u]nlike symbols which aspire to transcend the contingency of linguistic expression, allegories lament the failure of language to do so, and through this limitation, point to something beyond themselves—a not-yet—realised state made possible as a becoming-significant in a yet to be experienced world." (Mules, "The Future at Odds," 149).

<sup>58</sup> Benjamin's ideas on allegory are detailed in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*. Benjamin's conception of allegory is distinct from the romantic symbol. For Benjamin, symbols of nature are connected with ahistorical, classical idealisations of nature, whereas allegory deals with the historical

destroy and dissipate, producing piles of dead objectified material “garbage,” on the other hand films reactivate those dead objects, allegorising them in “a yet-to becoming-significant”<sup>59</sup> world. This “yet-to becoming-significant” world points to the fundamental operations of time in film.

The concept of time in Benjamin’s philosophy of art and history is an important aspect of Benjamin’s work, including the “Work of Art” essay. In the reproduction of the objectified world, the viewer experiences an image of time released from its particular conditions of existence and immersed into a *new* experiential contingency in time.<sup>60</sup> In her rendition of Benjamin’s work and contribution to contemporary film theory, Gertrud Koch writes:

In contrast to more recent apparatus theory which locates the ideological function of film squarely in the naturalisation of the technically produced impression of reality, Benjamin discovers amid the collapse of artifice and immediacy precisely the *Kairotic* constellation: the proverbial ‘orchid in the land of technology’. In this construction of a constellation, a notorious Benjaminian concept flashes brightly, that of ‘prehistory’, of the ‘primeval moment’, which he attempts to capture in historical phenomena as a ‘mirage’ which spreads its roots into the present of the new medium.<sup>61</sup>

Here, Koch refers to *Kairos*, or a conception of time that differs from *Kronos*, chronological, linear time.<sup>62</sup> For Koch, the “altered apperception” produced by the camera “builds a new world out of the rubble of the old one,”<sup>63</sup> and this altered apperception is precisely the “Blue

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materiality of nature, its finitude and impermanence. Benjamin writes, “[t]he unity of the material and the transcendental object, which constitutes the paradox of the theological symbol, is distorted into a relationship between appearance and essence. The introduction of this distorted conception of the symbol into aesthetics was a romantic and destructive extravagance which preceded the desolation of modern art criticism.” (Benjamin, *The Origin*, 160). As argued in the last section, Malick’s films allegorise and “part themselves” (Weber, *Benjamin’s Abilities*, 31) from their mythic, religious and sacred “sayings” of nature.

<sup>59</sup> Mules, “The Future at Odds,” 149.

<sup>60</sup> In this, Benjamin’s ideas on film prefigure Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the “time-image.” In particular, Benjamin’s ideas anticipate Deleuze’s conception of the “fundamental operation of time” in the filmic image, or what he terms the “crystal-image”: “[w]hat constitutes the crystal-image is the fundamental operation of time, since the past is constituted not after the present that it was, but at the same time, time has to split itself in two at each moment as present and past ... Time consists of this split and it is this, it is time that we see *in the crystal* [image]” (Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Roberta Galeta (London: Continuum, 2005), 78-79.)

<sup>61</sup> Gertrud Koch, “Cosmos in Film: on the Concept of Space in Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art’ Essay,” in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), 212.

<sup>62</sup> “Kairos” is never directly employed in Benjamin’s work, but the term has been associated with Benjamin’s conception of “now-time” [*Jetztzeit*] (see Kia Lindroos, *Now-Time / Image-Space: Temporalization of Politics in Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy of History and Art* (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 1998). Lindroos discusses the political implications of now-time as Kairotic and non-chronological conception of time in Benjamin’s thought.

<sup>63</sup> Koch, “Cosmos in Film,” 214.

Flower”<sup>64</sup> (or “orchid in the land of technology”) beyond the “collapse of immediacy.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, figuratively, the “orchid” in film is here interpreted as the singular openness to possibilities in always-new encounters with recurrent images as past *and* present. In *Badlands*, this intrinsic possibility of an “altered apperception” produced by the camera is crystallised in the scene of the stereopticon—a distinctively modern, pre-cinematic device.

In *Badlands*, there is a paradoxical moment of solace and quite enigmatic openness to possibilities in the forest, when Holly looks into the images of the stereopticon—a nineteenth century device for looking at photographs in stereoscopic vision. In the montage sequence that occurs in this scene, the viewer sees glimpses of Holly and Kit’s rather conventional daily life in their tree house. But in the sequence of the stereopticon, the viewer sees, like Holly, an artificial canal in Brazil, a camel boy in front of the Great Pyramid and Sphinx, some cows standing in a fjord with a steamship in the distance, a mother with her child, a Victorian woman playing the piano as another woman looks on, a family on a lawn, and a soldier in a wheat field whispering something into his girlfriend’s ear. All the while, Holly’s voiceover is saying:

One day, while taking a look at some vistas in dad’s stereopticon, it hit me that I was just this little girl, born in Texas, whose father was a sign painter and who had only just so many years to live. It sent a chill down my spine, and I thought where would I be this very moment if Kit had never met me? Or killed anybody? This very moment ... If my mom had never met my dad? If she’d of never died? And what’s the man I’ll marry going to look like? What’s he doing right this minute? Is he thinking about me now, by some coincidence, even though he doesn’t know me? Does it show on his face?

Here, the disjunctive relation between Holly’s voiceover narration and the images presented points to a chronological impossibility. Holly’s repeated “this very moment” and “right this minute” point to the gap between the images of the past and their (im)possible contingency in Holly’s present. The enigmatic openness of the sequence lies in its *Kairotic* potential, in the new possibilities offered by new encounters with exemplary images and objects removed from their past original context and meaning, and thrown into a new experiential contingency as past *and* present.

### **A Benjaminian Ecocritique of Malick’s *Badlands***

The montage sequence with Holly and Kit in the forest is exemplary and representative of *Badlands*’ main ontological problem: in utilising mythic and religious symbolism, the sequence

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<sup>64</sup> Benjamin’s use of the mythic “Blue Flower” in the context of his argument on film technology is representative and exemplary of his complex position beyond myth. In “Dream Kitsch” an earlier essay written in 1927, Benjamin writes: “No one really dreams any longer of the Blue Flower. Whoever awakes as Heinrich von Ofterdingen today must have overslept. The history of the dream remains to be written, and opening up a perspective on this subject would mean decisively overcoming the superstitious belief in natural necessity by means of historical illumination.” (Walter Benjamin, “Dream Kitsch,” in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* Vol. 2, Part 1 1927-1930, eds., Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2005), 3.

<sup>65</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 115.



allegorises humans' unfree, mediated and parted existence in nature. As it were, Kit and Holly are in a tree house reading a book.<sup>66</sup> A few sequences later, Kit reads the *National Geographic* magazine while eating an apple. The moment is shot from a very low camera angle with Kit's boots in a prominent position; he is also wearing a large brimmed hat. Again, Kit embodies the dominant, rational approach to nature (shot from below, reading a book that objectifies nature, and wearing the hat as a symbol of patriarchal authority), while Holly embodies the deadly innocent, naïve approach (innocent because it remains ignorant of Kit's rationality and deadly because it threatens the rational by returning it to its mortal limitation). She says, "I grew to love the forest. The cooing of the doves and the hum of dragonflies in the air made it always seem lonesome and like everybody's dead and gone ... When the leaves rustled overhead, it was like the spirits were whispering about all the little things that bothered 'em." In pursuing the scene's symbolism, the apple that Kit is eating (as he laughs reading the *National Geographic*) signifies the loss of paradisiacal unity and harmony between men and nature, the allegorical "fall" in/through language and knowledge. But in the sequence, the apple symbol is *allegorised* as other-possible-saying, rather than its original, symbolic meaning. Kit throws the apple core down from the tree and the camera tilts down following the fall for a moment, but right where the viewer would expect to find the apple core on the ground, the shot cuts to the array of stereo slides on the leaves of the forest floor. The editing clearly parallels the apple and the photographs; and this association assumes particular relevance under a Benjaminian perspective on the ontology of the reproducibility of images in modernity.

In interpreting the apple as a *figure* (and not as a symbol) in *Badlands*, the human-nature relationship is inevitably unfree and enframed within particular and historical modes of being. Nevertheless, the stereopticon scene exemplifies the Kairoitic work of *figures* in films, where "the figure is constructed by its own future, not motivated by its past."<sup>67</sup> In their Kairoitic potential, filmic images are allegorically resurrected from their particular historicity and thrown into a new historicity and possibility of interpretive transformation, into new and "free" possible "constellations" of meaning in time. In this Benjaminian view, *Badlands*—and by extension all films—operate as a goldmine of rubble, the "stored audiovisual material"<sup>68</sup> that awaits allegorical resurrection of its main ontological concerns expressed in and through their past *and* present figural gestures. This is an ontological approach to film, where films are seen as "the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind."<sup>69</sup> As such, Benjamin's ontology of film assumes a transformative potential in contemporary ecological film criticism. The *figure* in film<sup>70</sup> assumes the value of the "Blue Flower in the land of technology:" that

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<sup>66</sup> Holly reads from Thor Heyerdahl's Kon-Tiki expedition (the notorious experiment to prove Heyerdahl's theory of human migration from South America to Polynesia following oceanic currents in prehistoric times). The "experiment" itself can be interpreted as modern man's attempts to recuperate a lost, pre-historical "homogenous" (see Weber's "impart-ability" of human language mentioned in footnote 56 of this article) contact with nature through a scientific approach. The experiment is paradoxical, as is Kit and Holly's tree house.

<sup>67</sup> Routt, "For Criticism."

<sup>68</sup> Mules, "The Future at Odds."

<sup>69</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 223.

<sup>70</sup> The important Kairoitic function of the technically reproduced figure in Malick's films is also clear in *Days of Heaven* (1978) with the projection of Charlie Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1917) in a brief and intense sequence at the house of a farmer who is receiving a visit from a flying circus. In the sequence,

“primeval moment” which can be strangely recognised in—but never abstracted from—material, historical frameworks and phenomena as well as in and from the filmic image. As Koch figuratively puts it: “[r]evolutionary pathos and eschatological motive walk hand in hand during Benjamin’s trip through the pile of rubble which the cinematic technologies have blown open.”<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

Malick’s cinema is particularly apt at figural readings of its characters and setting; *Badlands*’ fairy-tale quality suggests such an approach. Malick does not impose authorial views, allowing the film to speak for itself in its immanent figurations. Indeed, the film’s figurations constitute an immanent “rhetorical scheme”<sup>72</sup> embedded in the film’s trajectory beyond its particular narrative elements of characters and *mise-en-scène*. In this, the disjunctive relation between the images presented and Holly’s voiceover narration produces a gap and interruption of narrative teleology that calls for viewers’ interpretations and questionings. As argued, *Badlands*’ figurations exceed gender and class analysis, openly challenge psychological and realistic readings, and leave the viewer reflecting on the ontological conditions of human relations to freedom in nature.

Malick’s presentation of images of waste and death in *Badlands* assumes a figural, ontological and deeply ecological value. The figural economy of the film constantly refers to death and objectification (sepulchral art, garbage, dead objects) as an inherent sickness that pervades the life of the characters.<sup>73</sup> A figural analysis points to the existential conditions of Kit’s closed entrapment in capitalistic systems of consumption and intrinsically commodified (and delusional) ideals of freedom and happiness. Kit imitates James Dean’s figure and ultimately “inhabits” a hedonistic desire of self-affirmation. But in the barren landscape of the allegorical badlands, Kit’s character is confronted with the inescapable material conditions of existence. In this stripped back existence that lacks a secure framework, Kit and Holly’s awkward attempt to live outside the material conventions of social life signifies the impossibility to return to an idealised immediacy with nature.

Such a reading exceeds political critique and religious symbolism. A Benjaminian approach to figures of waste in *Badlands* suggests that entropy and finitude are intrinsic to

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Malick’s film points to Chaplin’s original filmic gestures of “freedom” by presenting a film-within-a-film and a silhouetted hand (coming from *Days of Heaven* diegesis) suddenly appearing on the screen and pointing to the Statue of Liberty in Chaplin’s film. This open and anonymous *filmic gesture* in Malick’s *Days of Heaven* arguably points to “freedom” as something unfolding *on the screen itself* (as opposed to the symbolic freedom that the “real” statue represents and Chaplin’s film openly subverts). On the screen, freedom is enacted allegorically through the film’s own unfolding and Linda’s (Linda Manz) own making sense of it (Malick’s direction emphasises Linda’s sense of wonder at the images presented).

<sup>71</sup> Koch, “Cosmos in Film,” 213.

<sup>72</sup> Mules, “The Future at Odds.”

<sup>73</sup> The rich man’s house, where Kit steals the white Panama hat, significantly presents a series of visual and narrative motifs of death and sickness (the furniture covered in white sheets, for example, but also Kit’s reference to a contagious disease as an excuse to send away an unwanted visitor—played by Malick himself).

material conditions of existence and reveals the quixotic nature of any attempt to evade these conditions. Unity with nature, the film suggests, cannot be attained or recuperated through transcendence of finite material conditions of existence. In this, Malick's use of the film medium is deeply ontological (that is, Malick uses films' specific mode of being). Films allegorise the mediated relation of men and nature; in reproducing and letting appear an objectified world, films dissipate ideals and myths of transcendental freedom and unity with nature and the world. Following Benjamin, films' ontological function in modern culture is to remind viewers that the relation between humans and the world is ultimately unfree, *ad infinitum*.

Yet, Benjamin's approach suggests an unexpected possibility of freedom past the naïve and rational approach to nature. As exemplified in the stereopticon sequence, film technology can open up the film's figurations to new possibilities of being in time. An ecocritical approach to *Badlands* suggests that new possibilities spring from an understanding of the film's past figural contingency in the present. As argued, this possibility and freedom does not belong to *Badlands'* narrative elements (Kit and Holly's story does not find resolution in a freer state of existence). In this view, Kit and Holly's characters (their individual identities and subjectivities) are rather irrelevant, but their story is everyone's story, an orchid in the land of garbage.

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