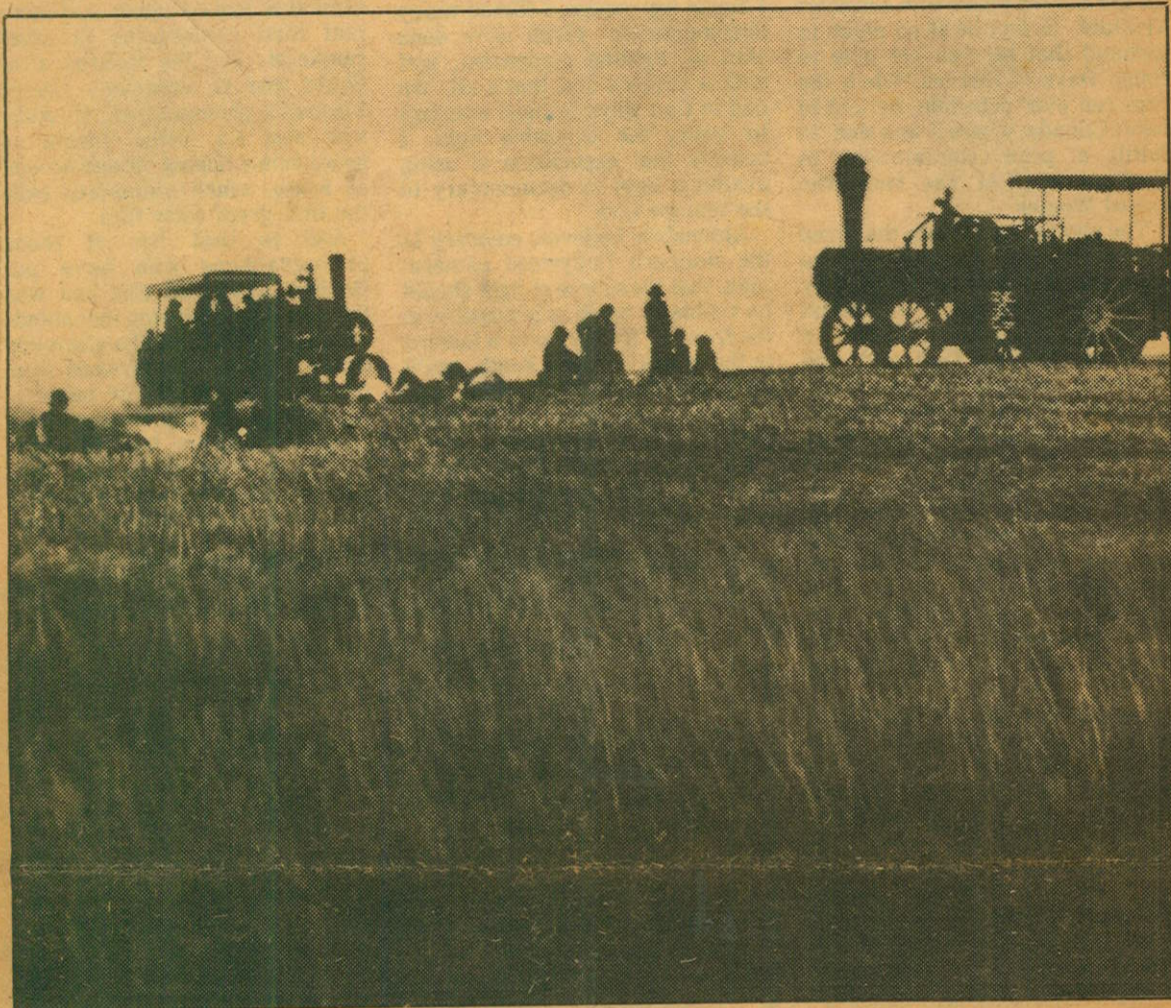


Films

Terence Malick's triumphant return



Cameraman Almendros' stunning photography

Days of Heaven Paramount Pictures

by Mitchell S. Cohen

Badlands, as eloquent a motion picture directorial debut as I've seen in this decade, was released in 1973, the same year as American Graffiti, Mean Streets and The Sugarland Express. But while Lucas, Scorsese and Spielberg went on to build creatively and financially on these early works, Terence Malick, Badlands' writer-director, wasn't heard from again. That is until Days of Heaven, a visually confident, dramatically poetic and extraordinarily beautiful film that pays off on all the promise of Badlands. It is, to be blunt, staggeringly original, although it does take off from such cinematic sources as Griffith, Ford and Vidor. The narrative, which unfolds casually against the landscape, is primal conflict, romantic and social. The movie is set in the Texas panhandle just prior to America's entry into World War I; Bill (Richard Gere) has gotten into a fight — we don't hear the counter-accusations, only see their results — with his factory foreman in Chicago, and goes on the run as an itinerant worker with his girlfriend Abby (Brooke Adams) and sister Linda (Linda Manz) who narrates the film in the same kind of flat comic-poignant tone of Sissy Spacek in Badlands. To avoid talk, Bill and Abby pretend they're

brother and sister. A rich farmer (Sam Shepard) falls for Abby and, convinced that the farmer has a fatal disease, Bill convinces Abby to marry the land owner. Inevitable violence erupts, culminating in a plague of locusts, a fire, murder, a chase, and the killing of Bill.

It's difficult to convey in print the impact of Days of Heaven. The first thing that attracts you to the film is the spectacular cinematography of Nestor Almendros and Haskell Wexler (who shot the closing scenes of the film: blazing flames, active insects, fields of wheat, the sky at dusk, snow, are all rendered with eye-popping vibrance. But as stunning as the images are, they aren't all the Malick has to offer. His point of view here and in Badlands is a mixture of detached objectivity — the camera records events dispassionately, without editorializing — and commonfolk sentimentality (Manz and Spacek's syntactically unique reading of lines that are pure mass-magazine philosophy). The sounds of both films, the voices, the dialog, the natural noises, stay with you as long as the look of them. Malick's integral use of music is another element that enhances his artistry. Martin Sheen and Sissy Spacek dancing to Nat "King" Cole's "A Blossom Fell" lit by a car's headlights is one of my most cherished movie sequences. And in

Days of Heaven Malick embellishes Ennio Morricone's score with such musical pieces as Doug Kershaw slashing at his fiddle at a farmworkers' celebration and the use of Leo Kottke and Camille Saint-Saens.

Malick also works extremely well with actors. Richard Gere's quiet strength and hesitant manner helps to make believable the moral ambivalence Bill feels about turning the woman he loves over to another man. Brooke Adams is solidly effective as Abby, who becomes torn between her original love and the wealthy farmer who draws his life force from here. Both, however, are all but eclipsed by the two novices who make up the other half of the quartet. Sam Shepard, the playwright, in his first screen appearance, has a craggy, fiery-eyed dignity and real screen registry. He's the film's John Carradine to Gere's Henry Fonda, and it's to the credit of Malick that he saw such potential in Shepard. Another find is young Linda Manz, carrying the weighty responsibility of having us assess the events of the film as she sees and conveys them. Her croaking, deadpan voice is letter-perfect, and her observations get most of the movie's laughs (some are also generated by a vaudeville troupe that lands on the farm from the air in a scene of Felliniesque incongruity), but her's is also a movie face; haunting, angular,

androgynous. She stands outside the triangle, caring for her brother but also fascinated and entertained by the comparative luxury she suddenly finds herself enjoying, and it's ultimately Linda whom we care the most about.

With only two films under his belt, Terence Malick has to be counted among the most arresting cinematic talents to emerge in the 1970's. He manages at the same time to be distant and intimate. He tells stories that are as sparse as morality tales but that unravel with the subtle inflections of short, pointed scenes and prosaic com-

positions. And he co-mingles character and environment so that the two are inextricable. Like many great love stories, Days of Heaven is about sacrifice and confusion, about circumstances that run out of control and sweep sympathetic people up with them. Days of Heaven is a particularly American breed of art film. A brilliant achievement, bleak, yet not without hope, not without humor. There's never been a movie quite like it, and I'm happy to be leaving the pages of Good Times for a film reviewing sabbatical on Malick's exquisite grace note.

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Film Clips

Nestor Almendros and 'The Magic Hour'

by Dennis Broe

Days of Heaven is a film of exquisite images; of breathtaking long shots of the workers in the wheat fields; of a train crossing a trestle with men and women hanging off the top of the train; and of the actors Richard Gere and Brooke Adams posed majestically in a stream with the water glimmering around them. The dramatic structure of the film is episodic, going from one short scene to another; the whole held together by the thin thread of a primitive, three-person, love story. But what the film is really about is those images; twenty to thirty second vignettes coming in rapid-fire clips one after the other, each one more startlingly beautiful than the last. This is a film not about

characters, and their interactions, but about light, light sources and the play of light on different surfaces.

It is one of the few big-budget Hollywood films ever made that takes as its subject not the psychological rendering of characters in dramatic terms, but the artistic arrangement of images in a painter's terms. It's sources are not the novel and the play, but the canvas and the easel.

Like no other film it thrusts to the forefront that sometimes forgotten figure in the Hollywood scheme, the cameraman. His hour, "there is still some kind of color in the sky but it's not the actual sunset. The light is very weird. It comes from the sky, but it does not come from any source. It is the diffused light which still

name is Nestor Almendros and he is coming to be recognized as one of the foremost cameramen in the world. In world cinema circles he is hardly an unknown figure, having worked in France since the early '60s with Eric Rohmer, as well as with Barbet Schroeder and for the last ten years with Francois Truffaut. In fact he is so much in demand that he was not able to finish Days of Heaven. When the film ran over schedule, he had to leave Canada, where it was shot, to fulfill a prior commitment to Truffaut to shoot The Man Who Loved Women.

The photography, from the scene where Richard Gere dies, plus the winter scenes, was then finished by perhaps America's foremost cameraman, Haskell Wexler who directed Medium Cool and won Academy Awards for his photography on Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf and Bound For Glory. Days is one of the most photographically stylized films ever made and the credit for the continuity, for the fact that there is no break in the style, and that the shots match perfectly to the point where it is impossible to tell where Almendros leaves off and Wexler picks up, goes to director Terence Malick.

Days, shot in 1976, is, Almendros' first American film. But more have followed. He worked with director Jack Nicholson and actor-comedian John Belushi on Going South and is currently in New York shooting Robert Benton's Kramer v. Kramer which stars Dustin Hoffman. He emerged as one of the star attractions of the recent New York Film Festival, with almost every review citing his superb work on Rohmer's Perceval and the soon-to-be-released Truffaut film, The Green Room. In The Green Room, Almendros says, Truffaut, in order to get the claustrophobic effect he desired, ordered that the sky never be seen in the film.

The secret of Days of Heaven, of the glistening images, is, Almendros says, that it was shot at "the magic hour," the time between when the sun sets and when there is no more light. Orson Welles' Touch of Evil is a black and white film shot at the magic hour, but Days is one of the first color films to be shot at that time.

"In color things get more complicated because as the light fades the colors change, so the matching of one shot to another (done in the laboratory after the film is completed) is more difficult."

According to Almendros, the magic hour is a misnomer. The actual shooting time each day is about half an hour. "We shot frantically. We kept shooting and shooting until there was practically no light left at all and the crew, a real, old-fashioned Hollywood crew, looked at us as if we were mad."

The crew, Almendros says, now somewhat gleefully, "thought we were doing Mickey Mouse stuff." But Almendros and Malick stuck to their guns and when the film was released, to a crescendo of critical praise, those two had the last laugh.

Sunsets, Almendros says, are a corny cliché in Hollywood films. On the other hand, at the magic

exists in the atmosphere." The effect, he says, is "like the lighting in an aquarium."

Though Almendros has shot in a variety of styles, two principles have dominated his work: "Realism and simplicity. I come from documentary. In Cuba, where I began my career, I filmed many documentaries, which were done with no lighting equipment, just with a camera and that's all. We had to find ways to light interiors by using the available light. I brought that experience of using available light in documentary to the feature film."

Almendros believes, contrary to the standard Hollywood cameraman, that the source of light should be visible as much as is possible in the frame. "If they carry a lantern in the mines in Going South, you'll see it and the lantern actually will light the scene. It will not be just a prop."

Naturally enough the cameramen Almendros admires are those who used natural light, as opposed

to those who used multiple studio light sources. They include: early American cameramen, especially D.W. Griffith's photographer, Billy Bitzer; American studio cameramen of the '30s, who he said, though they were not using natural light, still managed to produce films that looked rawer and more real than cameramen in other countries; and the Italians after World War II, especially Luchio Visconti's photographer, G. Aldo, who shot La Terra Terma on location in a fishing village as well as Senso, which Almendros calls the first great color film.

And to that list of those photographers who have put Realism above all else and who forged a kind of cinema that stands as an alternative to the gimmick-laden, illusionist, Hollywood film, must now be added the name of Almendros. He has learned well from his teachers and his films, especially Days of Heaven, now stand as teaching tools for the next generation of realist filmmakers.

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