

Terrence Malick, Days of Heaven (1978)

Major Credits:

producers: Bert and Harold Schneider
script: Terrence Malick
cinematography: Nestor Almendros (additional photography: Haskell Wexler)
music: Ennio Morricone (additional music: Leo Kottke)
cast: Bill (Richard Gere), Abby (Brooke Adams), The Farmer (Sam Shepard), Linda (Linda Manz)

Background:

Five years in the making, Days of Heaven was filmed in Canada over the course of a year to take advantage of the passing seasons. The producers, Bert and Harold Schneider, had previously been associated with such original, independent, and archetypal American films as Easy Rider, Five Easy Pieces, and The Last Picture Show. Malick, in his early 30's at the time, had himself been a poor migrant worker in Texas before going on to a graduate degree in philosophy from M.I.T. The cast was composed of virtual unknowns (even Gere, who had yet to be seen in Looking for Mr. Goodbar): Linda Manz, for example, was a non-professional, a New York college girl; Sam Shepard is a well-known, serious playwright from Texas.

Cinematic Qualities:

1. cinematography - Academy Award winner Nestor Almendros has created a visual experience that nearly overwhelms the spectator. Many of the compositions evoke familiar painting styles: the field workers, especially at play, suggest Bruegel; the panoramic vistas including the Victorian house evoke the American landscapes of Edward Hopper. Several insert shots--the two wine glasses and decanter, the broken glass beneath the water--are pure still lifes. Note, too, how the credit sequence uses the historical photographs of Lewis Hine and others, along with cinematic techniques--dissolves, montage, camera movement, and music--to create a period mood.
2. voice-over - the girl's narration is reminiscent of Huckleberry Finn's (Twain's novel has been acknowledged by Malick as a major influence on his first two films). It is simultaneously sensitive and naive, neurotic and hopeful. Malick seems a master, like Twain, of elevating cliché and non sequitur to the levels of art and poetry. Note that there is relatively little dialogue in the film.
3. editing - following what has come to be identified with the modern European style, Malick generally employs the long take--a minimum of editing except for the violent sequences. Note how often he uses dissolves to create a dreamlike or poetic mood.
4. In general, the film's style manages to create a sense of incongruity, beginning, perhaps, with the juxtaposition of historical photographs with an expressionistic presentation in the credit sequence. Similarly, Linda's nasal urban accent clashes with the rural Western landscape; the use of telephoto long shots is often combined with microscopic close-ups; the shooting style (moving camera, often hand-held) incorporates the best of Hollywood technology with the expressive, cryptic style of the European avant-garde; "the look of Days of Heaven may suggest the monumental art of the epic, but the story it tells is strongly reminiscent of the minimal art of the ballad" (Joy Gould Boyum).

Malick, Days of Heaven

A SAMPLE FROM LINDA'S NARRATION

visual content

h-a shot of migrants riding the train, 2-shot of Bill and Abby

montage of harvesting

montage of end of harvest

montage: ls of house, cu of Linda lying on the ground, micro cu of locust, ls of animals watering, ls of storm gathering

montage of the good life: swimming, tricks at the gazebo, playing golf...
The farmer observes Bill and Abby together; the weathervane at night

Bill leaves with the flying circus.
Montage of winter scenes, then planting, the stone boat in the wheat field, micro cu time lapse shot of germinating wheat

escape by water
cu of Linda sitting in back of boat and looking blankly straight ahead

night on the river; ls of men warming themselves by a bonfire at night

early dawn by the railroad tracks;
ls of two girls walking down tracks

voice-over

"They told everybody they were brother and sister. My brother didn't want anybody to know. You know how people are. You tell them something, they start talking."

"Come the time the sun went up till it went down, they was working all the time. Non-stop, just keep going. You didn't work, they'd ship you right outa there. They don't need you. They can always get someone else."

"This farmer, he had a big spread and a lotta money. Whoever was sitting in the chair when he come around, why'd they stand up and give it to him? Warn't no harm in him. You'd give him a flower, he'd keep it forever. He was headed for the boneyard any minute, but he wasn't squakin' about it. Like some people. In one way I felt sorry for him. 'Cause he had nobody to stand out for him, be by his side, hold his hand when he needs attention. That's touchin'."

"I've been thinking what to do with my future. I could be a mud doctor, checking out the earth, underneath."

"We never been this rich, all right? I mean, we were just all of a sudden living like kings. Nothing to do all day but crack jokes, lay around. We didn't have to work. I'm tellin' you, the rich got it made..."

"I got to like this farm. Do anything I want: roll in the fields, talk to the wheat patches. When I was sleeping, they'd talk to me. They'd go in my dreams."

"He seen how it was...
He the farmer taught me keys on a piano, and notes. He taught me about the parts of a globe."

"Nobody's perfect. There was never a perfect person around. You've just got half devil and half angel in you."

"Some sights that I saw was really spooky that it gave me goose pimples. I felt like cold hands touchin' the back of my neck... I remember this guy, his name was Black Jack. He died. And I think that was Black Jack makin' those noises."

"... I was hoping things would work out for her. She was a good friend of mine."