From detail to meaning: 'Badlands' (Terence Malick, 1973) and cinematic articulation

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This chapter focuses on an overlapping series of journeys. It offers several interpretive journeys from the detail of brief moments in *Badlands* to critical frameworks for discussing the meanings of the film as whole. These movements from detail to meaning also entail the linkage of aspects of the film to broader film-theoretical problematics such as genre, narration, gender and familial roles, and the placing of the film in a historical context within the American film culture of the 1970s. While the interpretive discussion of *Badlands* demonstrates the power of detailed film analysis to open up a vista of theoretical and cultural study, the purpose of the analysis is not only to explore the meanings of this film in particular (an enterprise necessarily restricted by constraints of space), but also to reflect on the discursive process of film criticism. I shall begin at the beginning, by discussing three brief moments from the opening of the film, then consider the film more broadly, in less detail. The chapter ends with a series of theoretical reflections on the methods of film analysis and criticism in general. Starting with a detail from *Badlands* is not a theory-free approach, since after all the decision to start with the text, to subordinate my discourse to that of the film, is already laden with assumptions about the relationship of the critic to his or her object of study. Indeed this paper focuses on what is at stake in the relationship of critic to film, and the relationship of theory to its object.

The motif of the journey is used here to suggest that there is a plausible critical movement from detail to theory, and also to question the notions of progress entailed in

journeys, whether literal or discursive. *Badlands* is itself a film about journeys, notably the journey undertaken by the two main characters as they escape from a small town and travel cross-country towards Montana. I shall argue later that the journey in *Badlands* undercuts assumptions about self-discovery in the Road Movie, and about the frontier (the badlands of Montana) as the locus for a discovery of identity. The motif of the journey as a progression toward an origin, a truth, or a self will also be used as a means to reflect on the procedures of film analysis. *Badlands* is a suitable site for exploring these issues because the film uses distancing techniques which can be noted at the level of the shot, the sequence, the structure of narration, as well as in tropes or themes, and these distancing techniques focus attention on details at the same time as they call for an interpretation which reflects on and surpasses what the spectator is given to see and hear. However, I am going to argue not that *Badlands* is a 'radical film' either in its cinematic construction or in its 'message', but that it functions as a metacommentary on the film's relationship to American cinema's histories, genres and tropes. From this perspective, *Badlands* becomes a film about film, in the sense that it foregrounds the different interpretive schemas which might be used in moving from immanent analysis of detail to film-theoretical discourse in general.

I shall begin this journey from a specific sequence, in fact the first shot of the film, before even its title has appeared on the screen. What we see is Holly (Sissy Spacek) sitting on a double bed, playing with a large dog, while the camera moves in a slow tracking shot from the side of the bed to a slightly elevated position at its foot. Holly's voice, relatively unemotional and flat in tone, describes how after the death of her mother, she and her father moved house to the town of Fort Dupree, South Dakota. A similarly slow, somewhat mournful or nostalgic musical accompaniment begins during the shot. The film's opening scene, showing Holly playing on a bed with a dog,

seems to be set in the house which the family left when the mother died. This opening moment is then a kind of memory-image, a flashback to a lost time in which the family was complete. Holly is probably sitting on her parents' bed, and her caresses and play with the dog signify both a childlike playfulness and affection, yet her actions might also represent a certain sensuality at the same time as a disavowal or repudiation of the adult sexuality which the bed and the animal make available for this interpretive pathway. Holly's voice-over comments that her father must have been dismayed by the presence of his daughter, as a reminder of her mother and a mark of the mother's loss.

One of the stories which film studies might tell about the film is to cast it as a family romance, and the journey here is from detail to psychoanalytic criticism. Holly, from this point of view, stands in the place of the mother but cannot fulfill that place. The attempts of Kit (Martin Sheen) to leave with Holly, taking her from her father, lead to Kit's shooting of the father in a contest over the role which Holly occupies. For Kit, she is at once a child who he meets after school or under the bleachers at the school sports field, and also a lover with whom he wants to run away. For the father (Warren Oates), Holly is a child who needs protection, but also a beloved whose role as substitute for and sign of his own wife renders her a love object for him too. Later in the film, when Holly and Kit are living in a stockaded treehouse reminiscent of both Tarzan and Jane's dwelling in the Johnny Weismuller films, and also redolent of the defensive tunnels and camps of the fighters in the Korean War against whom Kit had fought, Holly takes on a maternal and wifely role in her relationship with Kit. She wears makeup, puts her hair in curlers, decorates their treehouse, and reads to Kit from Tor Hayerdal's *Kon-Tiki Expedition*. The adventure of their escape into a pastoral dreamworld involves both adult roles (Kit practises the guerrilla warfare techniques which enable him to defeat the law officers who attempt to capture them), but also perpetuates their childlikeness.

Holly still has her schoolbooks with her, because Kit doesn't want being on the run to make her fall behind in her education, and the couple dance to pop music on their radio. As the song they are dancing to claims, 'Love is strange / A lot of people / Take it for a game'. Presenting love as a game of roles and positions both questions ideologies of husband and wife, masculine and feminine, parent and child, and also questions the violence which erupts when those roles are shifted. For the beginning of Holly's journey away from the family involves the killing of her father, and along the way as the journey unfolds, further characters threatening an enforced return to that starting-point are gunned down by Kit.

The film could be read, then, as being about the loss of an originary maternal security, and the forces which are consequently released as sexual desire, violence, and struggles to either repudiate or repeat the nuclear family. This is a variant on the Oedipal logic discerned by psychoanalytic film criticism (see for example Raymond Bellour in Bergstrom 1979). My first journey, then, has been from the opening shot of Holly and the dog on her parents' bed, with its accompanying voiceover, on a track through the film that frames it as the collision of several 'family romances': the family that existed before the film's present tense, the family without a mother at the film's opening, and the fantasized family constructed by Kit and Holly. Masculine, feminine, maternal, paternal, filial, and sexualized adolescent roles are rendered volatile and placed in conflict with each other in this interpretive journey.

My second journey is from the opening shots of the film to questions of genre prompted by Holly's framing comment in her voiceover that the film is a story of a journey from 'the alleys and back ways of this quiet town' to 'the badlands of Montana'. This voice-over draws attention to a number of ways that the film is articulated with and against a number of binaries in cinema and in cinema studies. The quiet little town of

Fort Dupree, South Dakota, is at once the heart of America, but also one of those places at the edge which embodies a mythic America outside of the cosmopolitan urbanism of the contemporary. The value of this mythic America can be both positive and negative, both innocent and banal, both communitarian and oppressive, and the still shots of the town, showing picturesque but static unpeopled views, provide evidence to support the voice-over's implication that the town is a boring place. The badlands of Montana, to which Holly and Kit escape after Kit shoots Holly's father, are similarly multiple in their possible significance. The badlands are the empty space in which an authentic identity might be carved out, as in the Western (see Pye 1999), but they are also a null space, in which the activities of the characters leave no mark on the blank page of the prairie, and in which the story of Holly and Kit is finally insignificant and delusory. The beautiful close-ups of prairie animals later in the film, accompanied by haunting marimba music, show a world going on beyond Kit and Holly's story, a world which is oblivious to them (similar shots in Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998) have a similar function). If the film alerts us to genre, by signaling the small town film and the Western, it also asks us to consider the ambivalent significance of mise-en-scène and setting as parallels with, and contrasts to, the human drama of the film.

In these respects, the film is also about storytelling, since the kinds of stories we might expect in the small town film and the Western are significantly different, and the film counterposes these kinds of story without privileging either of them. So another journey which begins from the issue of genre raised by Holly's voice-over is about how different kinds of narrative invest details with meaning. *Badlands* can be interpreted as a film about how significance is achieved: how stories, narration, fantasies of escape, and memory, are attempts to give meaning to a depthless surface. Neither Holly nor Kit seem to feel or desire anything, a mood which is conveyed by the deadpan tone of

Spacek's voice-over, and by the inadequacy of the attempts by Holly and Kit to mark out significant moments in their journey and their relationship. The first time that Kit and Holly have sex for example, by the bank of a river, Holly asks whether that's all there is to it, and wonders what everybody had been so excited about. Kit picks up a large rock to take away as a souvenir of their encounter, but casts the stone away because it is heavy, and simply chooses a smaller stone. There is nothing necessary about the sign which marks the moment, and nothing intrinsically interesting about it. The couple bury some of their possessions in a bucket on the prairie, as a memorial for future people to find, and when captured finally by the police, Kit carefully allows time to build a cairn of stones to memorialize the place where his journey stopped. These little monuments are attempts to mark space and to fix meaning, but they remain heaps of rocks and a bucket of dusty bric-a-brac.

The film shows attempts by the couple to fit their behaviour into story structures, like the teen romance or the outlaw pursuit, but the characters and their actions cannot carry the mythological weight of grandeur and notoriety that they aim for. When Kit is shown recording a message to posterity explaining the motives for killing Holly's father, he runs out of things to say before the recording time has finished, and the record player on which the record plays outside Holly's house is seen being consumed by fire in a long sequence showing the burning of the house. Kit's attempt to memorialize his actions does not survive. In the only visual sequences which are beyond the consciousness of the main characters, Holly's voice-over describes the excessive precautions taken by people across the Midwest to protect themselves from Holly and Kit, who have become notorious outlaws. The monochrome newsreel-style shots accompanying this voice-over reveal the distance between the banal but violent actions of Holly and Kit themselves, and the hysterical but patently unnecessary precautions of

townspeople. When Kit and Holly are captured, they are guarded at a military base by an excessive number of soldiers and police. Kit is admired and liked by these officers not because he is notorious, but because he is ordinary, friendly, and talkative. Following an American tradition which goes back at least as far as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, storytelling is a vital component of identity and self-definition in American culture, but also a diversion from the actual banality of crime, violence, and heroism. The making of meaning, the telling of stories, and the distance between the banal and the mythic, are part of what *Badlands* articulates. One of the key points that a study of detail in *Badlands* makes clear is that the film thematises the construction of significance in the lives of the characters. In marking this issue as significant, the film also poses a question to its interpreters (to its spectators and also to film theorists) about how they make the journey from detail to meaning. The attribution of meaning and value, and the discursive terms in which significance is framed, are already questioned in the film before debates about interpretive legitimacy are raised in critical discourse about the film.

In *Badlands* identity is a matter of performing the conventions of an identity, and shifting from one position to another in structures which provide a contingent and partial significance to the characters' lives. At the moment of Holly and Kit's first meeting, Holly is performing with her cheerleader's baton, while Kit presents himself as a teen idol, a James Dean-style rebel. When they meet, cuts back and forth between them suggest a mutual recognition that they are both playing out roles, and this is the common factor which enables their relationship to begin. Andrew Britton (1981: 4) argued that American films of the 1970s 'are primarily of interest for the various ways in which they seek to negotiate a historical moment which includes not only Vietnam and Watergate, but also the critique of the family, and the questioning of gender roles developed by the

women's and gay movements.' For *Badlands* to open with Kit masquerading as James Dean, and Holly listlessly practising her moves with a marching band baton, is to signal at once the gendered roles that the characters initially play out, and which they will renegotiate together. Their journey is not simply away from these roles to more authentic ones, however, since for example when Kit is finally captured by two police patrolmen, he is delighted when one of them describes him as looking just like James Dean.

In his discussion of the war film, and especially films around the subject of Vietnam, Britton argues that a problem arises when a film retains a hero-function, but places him/it in a situation which is both inexplicable by the film, and also a situation which calls into question the values like masculinity or morality which underlie the hero's agency. The contradiction between the hero-function and the situation produces 'a hero whose activity (still deemed of value) remains "tragically" unrealised; a hero who is passive - not acting, but acted on; or a hero whose assertion of agency appears as compulsive and psychotic' (1981: 5). Britton later quotes Norman Mailer as a voice supporting a view of the hero as the American existentialist, where in response to a deadening social order 'the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self' (1981: 13). This form of agency is complicit with the forces of the social order, in willingly falling into its Romantic valuation of the individualist frontier hero, its metaphorical substitution of a physical journey for a moral one, and its inverted, negative version of the theory that heroism consists in realizing in behaviour a supposedly 'true' selfhood which has been hitherto obscured by the quotidian demands of getting on with other people.

Badlands offers a contradictory and unresolved attitude to the hero, who is both effective, active, attractive, and nice, but also irrational, unpredictable, excessively violent, and criminal. The fact that Kit both resembles and imitates James Dean makes him doubly out of place: he is a throwback to the iconography of the rebellious teen, complete with car, chewing gum, and white tee-shirt, but he is also distinctly working class (a garbage man and a cattle-pen worker, as opposed to Dean's suburban middle-class milieu) and too old to be a rebel without a cause (ten years older than Holly, and not at college). In contrast to the teenage rebel's actions, Kit's behaviour seems excessive, useless, childlike, and inconsistent. On one hand, it keys into the Romantic myth of childhood as an originary, true selfhood uncontaminated by society and its demands, a utopian childhood which meshes with the myth of the frontier and the open plains as a Garden of Eden, a playground in which one finds oneself. On the other hand, this regressive, defensive, and immature behaviour is part of an unwinnable Oedipal struggle where parental figures, and maturity itself, are aggressively and pointlessly resisted. The film's allusions to myths of masculine self-realization do not therefore produce a narrative progression in which a heroic identity is achieved. It is symptomatic that Holly gradually becomes bored and frustrated with the couple's journey, and begins to engage in minor defiances of Kit's grand narrative about their outlaw grandeur. The film offers the spectator a sequence of scenes in their car as they rush headlong across the prairies. Holly almost ceases to communicate with Kit, and her voice-over informs us that instead she spells out whole sentences on the roof of her mouth with the tip of her tongue. By doing this, she articulates an unseen, unspoken alternative writing in her mouth that, together with the voice-over retrospectively accompanying the sequence, denies Kit mastery over the terms in which their journey's meaning can be framed.

Badlands can be regarded as constituted by a movement from one space to another (from town to prairie to airport, or from home to nature to sky) where the narrative journey of the road movie as a journey to the inside of the self contrasts with the journey from contained spaces to open spaces of transcendence. In this reading, there is progression though space and progression towards an achieved personal identity, each of which is a metaphor for the other. But this progression is problematised by the film's final aeroplane journey, an image both of transcendence and of entrapment simultaneously since the visual beauty and freedom of the airborne shots of clouds touched by evening sunlight is counterpointed by the knowledge that the aeroplane is taking Kit and Holly towards their punishment by the institutions of the law. Furthermore, there is an ironic counterpoint between Holly's voice-over at the end of the film where she tells of her eventual marriage to another man and settling down into conventional domesticity, and the images in the film's final minutes. The final sequence is only the last in a series of disjunctures between the image-track and the retrospective voice-over narration. The whole film raises questions about the primacy of either the voice-over or the image as a fixing element, for what is articulated by the image track or articulated in voice counterpoint each other - sometimes to confirm meaning, but sometimes to question it. The fact that Holly's voice-over is retrospective tends to privilege her version of events since it is reflective and interpretive, offering a means of articulating the film's scenes together into a story. Yet the tone of the voice-over, delivered in a deadpan tone and reducing the complexities of the actors' performances and the visceral violence of some of the characters' actions to simple statements (like 'Kit was the most trigger-happy guy I ever met' as a coda to the gunning-down of his friend in a field) is distant from the visually represented action and often inadequate to channel its impact on the spectator. The disjuncture between image and voice produces

a necessity for the spectator to make a journey from detail to meaning that is not mapped out definitively by the visual and aural articulations of the film itself, but requires instead a spectator enagaged in trying out a number of possible routes through the film.

Badlands can also offer, therefore, a site for the exploration of the multiple meanings of the term 'articulation' which I have used so often in this chapter. Articulation refers to the vocal articulation in voice-over as supplement to the image track, and to the articulation of images and sounds together in this or another film, and also to the enunciation of theory as an interpretive discourse. Having made some remarks about the first two kinds of articulation so far, the remainder of this essay considers the third sense of articulation; the discourse in which my remarks have been made. What film studies does is to supplement one kind of articulation with another. The film, which is itself an intervention in culture, could be described therefore as an articulation, a contribution to the dialogues of the public sphere. In accounting for the specific nature and effects of a film, accounting for its meaning, it becomes necessary to give an account of it in a language other than its own. The film is articulated by film criticism. Furthermore, for readers to judge the correctness or perspicacity of a critical articulation about a film is to consider it in two other related ways. First, does the critical discourse give the sense of how the film works - its meaning, but also its tone, its mood, its affective relationship with its spectator? Second, does the critical analysis itself intervene in a cultural debate, and by doing so bring to notice the fact that the film has something to say? This second question draws attention to the fact that film criticism is not a pure articulation, if such a thing could exist, but necessarily one which is engaged in the movement of public discourse more generally. To put this another way, film criticism is inherently political because it is articulated in relation to culture. Articulated, in this sense, means both that film criticism is a discourse which voices

itself among the other competing discourses of culture, and also that it exists as a discourse by working on and with a cultural object, a film, to which it is linked or hinged.

Since film criticism in the sense that it is practised in this book is part of the academic and pedagogical world, another question arises in considering the ways that film criticism responds to a film's articulacy, and tries to articulate this again in other terms which further the movement of debate and inquiry in culture. That question is how the study of a film can enable further articulations by students, among fellow researchers, and in the arena of publication (this is the project of, for example, Elsaesser and Buckland 2002). By offering to write about *Badlands*, I am implicitly suggesting that the film has something to say to me, to you, to the film studies community more widely, and to all those who have an interest in film, in culture, and in criticism. In this respect, there is a journey from detail to meaning in my analysis of the film itself, but also a journey from a particular object (*Badlands*) to a set of ideas which claim a greater purchase. *Badlands* becomes the locus of an articulation which begins from what I say that the film has to say, and therefore the film becomes not simply the contingent, happenstance object that I chose to write about, but also a privileged place from where my wider observations can make sense.

My choice to write about *Badlands* is motivated then not only by my view that the film has something to say (about the hero, about gender, about narrative structure, about genre), but also by the specific ways in which the film articulates these things. My journey of interpretation through the film can become a metaphor for the processes involved in film study itself. For the interpretive journey through *Badlands* travels in parallel with the trajectory of film analysis from detail to meaning, from the particular to the general, from the object to its theorization. *Badlands* becomes privileged by this

selection and analysis, but at a certain point the film is also neglected in favour of the place where it allows me to go. *Badlands* is the starting point of this journey, a commentary on this journey, but not the journey's destination, since the theoretical points about film studies which I am making here exceed the film as a particular object, and reflect back on the very activity of selecting the film as my object of study in the first place. So the study of detail necessarily produces a relation to theory. The example is always placed in relation to a metalanguage of criticism which it supports, affects or challenges, and the further theoretical issue raised by this becomes a question about the authority of film-theoretical metalanguages.

In the context of an analysis of *Last Chants for a Slow Dance* (Jon Jost, 1977), Jim Hillier (1981: 109) argued that 'even the supposedly "progressive" American cinema of the seventies (Altman, Hellman, Malick, Rudolph, Rafelson and others) belongs, fundamentally, to "Hollywood", to the dominant system, both economically-industrially and formally'. For Hillier, the potential progressiveness of Altman's films is circumscribed by their belonging to 'Hollywood art movies'. It is the issue of belonging that I would like to focus on, as a way of considering how film-theoretical categories articulate the political meanings of films. Robin Wood (1981: 42) proposed that in the 1970s social structure was questioned, to the extent that the decade was one in which 'the dominant ideology *almost* disintegrated'. The importance of this '*almost*' for my reading of *Badlands* is that I have been arguing that the film is articulated in and against a wide range of categories and genres of film, and offers itself for readings which articulate the cultural and historical debates about American cinema of the 1970s in terms of gender, the family, violence, freedom, individualism, and mythmaking. *Badlands* is more available for readings of this kind, because of reflexivity, than American films outside the sub-category of 'Hollywood art movies'. It is perhaps too

easy an example to choose in order to articulate these ideological and representational issues. But historically, film studies has perpetually increased the number of films regarded, after a detailed analysis has been carried out, as examples of critical commentary despite being apparently mainstream. Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni's (1969) 'Category E' is a class of films which are neither complicit with dominant ideology nor radical critiques of ideology, but from within a mainstream cinema tradition raise questions about ideology without being able to resolve them or offer alternatives. However, once any film is analysed in detail, it tends to drift into Category E. Once a film is taken out of a general category, like the categories of complicit or radical, and analysed in detail, it reveals itself as an articulation rather than an object, and it becomes a site of conflict, ambiguity, and interest. At the extreme of this view, no film can be dismissed as a straightforward example in a category, and this problem therefore collapses the divisions between categories like radical or complicit, and requires the elaboration of new categories which further subdivide films.

My interest in this issue is less in the specific form of these categories, and which films can be definitively established as members of them. Instead, I want to draw attention to the fact that the process of analysing detail in films throws the activity of categorisation into doubt (see Brunette and Wills 1989). This is most obviously the case with generic categories, but occurs whenever a trait of belonging is identified. Every film, once it is considered in detail as an articulation, and is supplemented by another articulation, namely the discourse of film-critical theorisation, has a crucial and problematic status. Such a film becomes the interface between considering a film as a representative object for theoretical discourse on the one hand, and on the other hand considering it as a unique articulation which exceeds the ability of a metalanguage to master it (see Bignell 2000). Indeed, this problem affects every use of an instance or

example as a location for remarks of a general and theoretical nature. The journey from detail to meaning is both essential to film studies as a discipline, and also enables the discussion of questions of origin and destination, trajectory and aim, on which that journey is necessarily based. Finally, then, what I am arguing for in this essay is not only the value of *Badlands*, nor yet the value of any particular theoretical discourse as most pertinent for its interpretation, but for the reflexivity of any critical discourse that cites films as examples and moves from detail to meaning.

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