

Change and Poetry: A Study of the Changing Styles of Malick's Images

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ABSTRACT

Terrance Malick is one of the most authorial directors, and moreover, his films chronically undergo dramatic changes in style and theme. This essay is based on the films he made during the 40 years after his debut as a Virgo, the period when his style changed the most. And after that, as he shot more frequently, the films tended to be similar. In these forty years, the intervals between his films are so different thus they are worth studying. This essay majorly analyzes the two aspects of Malick's 5 films: from the script aspect, and from style aspect. The essay tries to interpret the philosophical value of Terrance Malick's work, which is strongly affected by philosopher: Martin Heidegger. This paper traces back to the techniques and styles used in the film, and links these factors with Heidegger's philosophical thoughts, so as to analyze the purpose of Malick's use of these techniques and design. At last, the essay comes out with the conclusion that Malick's changing style is resulted from his pursue of poetic in the art, which is one of Heidegger's important prompt in field of art.

Keywords: *Terrance Malick, Martin Heidegger, Existentialism, Poetry film, Independent film.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Terrance Malick is a treasure trove in film history analysis. First of all, from a horizontal perspective, he has a strong style in many aspects of a film, from lighting to cinematography to script design and character design. This is an analysis of various aspects of a single film that most of the existing literature has. However, there is little data to analyze the relationship between films from a longitudinal time perspective. As Malick's films became more chronologically episodic and the camera moved more freely, these changes were documented and often related to malick's own mindset and shooting style. This paper analyzes malick's style from the point of view of time and explores the reasons for it. This paper begins with malick's film shooting concept and analyzes the school of film theory he inherited. In addition, the study of the philosopher Hegdel's thought, which has a great influence on Malick's own philosophical thought, aims to explore how Malick presents his own philosophical idea in the influence. And take an image creator as a typical example to study the expression of the creator's own thought transformation in his image.

2. BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF REASON FOR MALICK'S IMAGE STYLE ALTERNATION

Terrence Malick only directed 5 films in his first 40 years of his filmmaking career. However, there is not only a large time lag between each of the films, but also a distinct alteration in style of image styles. Without getting into the narratives, the audiences could feel the distinction in cinematography between each films. As Malick himself had given almost no interviews from the media or scholars in the past decades, there was no certain evidence explaining why he made these change in styles. In general, the image style is the most direct way for directors to express their ideas. Thus, the clues to explain Malick's dramatic image style alternation could be acquired from his change in personal value and life philosophy. It was noticeable that there was a 20 years gap between his second film, "Days of Heaven", and his third film, "The thin red line". This interval was regarded as a most distinct watershed of his directing method. In the former, fixed position was the major the camera movement design. In contrast, in the latter one, a complex mise-en-scene dominate whole film. It was reasonable that, in these twenty years, there was a key

change in his philosophical belief which influence his way of film-making dramatically, as he used film as a media to speak out his refreshing understanding of this world after twenty years.

3. LONG AND ICONIC ROAD OF CREATION: OVERVIEW OF MALICK'S CREATION PROCESS

Graduated in Harvard with a philosophy degree in 1965 and further study in Oxford on Martin Heidegger thoughts for 4 years, Malick attended the American Film Institute Conservatory in 1969. With a solid academic background in philosophy, Malick eventually start his first long picture at 1973. He learned a lot of philosophical theories based on Heidegger in the university and put forward his own objection. This gives his feature films a deep ideological foundation in nature. Therefore, the techniques and styles used in this film serve his thoughts more than other films. In general, his creative background determines that his images are highly authorial. The age he started his film career was in independent film's dynamism, especially when Hollywood had end with its 60's golden and turn into "New Hollywood". This provides him with large opportunities stay in Hollywood system. He could acquire finance needed for his independent production relative well-offed.

His first film, "Badlands", tells a dramatic event, involve in murder and relationship. This film won its high status for telling a strange story in a calm style. This success provided him with freedom in shooting next film, "Days of heaven", this picture highly inheritance the dramatic nature of last one, but it present the natural background in a much more magnificent way, which was shown in a perfect capture of natural light, and composition design combined the character with vast natural background. "Days of heaven" reveal Malick's obsession on natural, and the desire to explore a serendipity in real life event. Twenty years of no work followed, Malick finally gave out his third film, "The thin red line", which depict battle in island in World War II. The distinct change in Malick's belief of filmmaking soon appeared in the chosen of plot. Instead of developing how the whole war get processed, Malick focused on relationship between individuals in the war, which is less dramatic but emotional. What remained is a massive shots about natural background in plant. Another film, "The new world", about war and conflict shot similarly as "The thin red line" came out in 2005.

In his fifth film "The tree of life", a huge change is made. Malick seems to put the camera there and let it shoot by its own conscious. The plot is totally "stream of consciousness" about family issue. No clear plot line is presented, however, the strong emotion fill over the

film. The run time 3-hours also pull the audience into this family epic.

Besides those obvious clues in the change of plot, the inner thought of Malick also changes during these years. All the films are focusing on different principles. But "Badlands" and "Days of heaven" mostly focus on the men themselves, for example, the relationship between three characters in "Days of heaven". The "Badlands" also happen in the view of a character and focus on what the characters are thinking. In "The thin red line" and "The new world", the focus turns more to the reflection of the development of the whole humanity, and the interaction between he human and environment. In "The tree of life" this focus on the environment is enlarged more, which turn in to the concern of the origin of everything, moreover, containing the personal experience of the author.

In a conclusion, Malick in his first 40 years of shooting career always follow the independent filmmaking system, he put the background of his story both in history and modern time, but increasingly focus on characters rather than plot. A clear story gradually diminishes, and what replace it is character's inner thoughts and emotions, expressing their life philosophy, in the background Malick set for them.

4. TO THE DEATH AND THE MEANING OF LIFE: CHANGE IN MALICK'S CORE PHILOSOPHY VALUE

The philosophical principles that Malick wants to express his film can be concluded to change from focusing on "individual" to focusing on "individual and environment" to at last "everything in the universe". "Badlands" and "Days of heaven" focused on the relationship between peoples, which was a showing of existentialism. In this two films, the characters are always making decisions. These decisions, such as kill the innocent people, cheat the friends, are wrong in the common sense, showed individual's freedom to make decisions, which is the core idea of existentialism. After 20 years, Malick started to focus on Heidegger's principles of disapproving the over development of the technology in "The thin red line", as the war is a product of people and technology. Malick use the comparison of the natural sights and the war scene to show the audience the war's damage on the environment. In the same way, "The new world" is also about the topic of human's technologies' invasion of nature. When turned to "The tree of life", he portrait a life of a normal family. A family was regarded as the model of every living organisms in the world. In the film, Malick also discussed about the origin of the universe, which enlarged the scope of objects that Malick want to develop from past films. The development of film's theme from small to big could

not only be explain by Malick' s deeper understanding on Heidegger' s principles, but it also through from his own living experience. It was said that in his 20 years retirement from film making, he traveled to a lot of place in the world, walking from desert in America to the deepest cave in Asia. He experienced the beauty of the nature, which finally made him to enlarge the scope of theme he wants to discuss, and enable him to fully knew the importance of the earth' s environment.

4.1. Heidegger' s theory--existentialism

Heidegger' s Existentialism is a philosophy principle focus of on the existence of human individual. It majorly focuses on how people achieve their value in world as an individual. It esteem the freedom and individuality, and regard the individual' s sentimental decision as the most valuable one[1]. For Heidegger, there are three of his major thoughts that are important to the ideas that Malick want to express in his film. Some films emphasize just one idea, while others combine them all. In the following paragraphs, I am going to explain three principle of Heidegger' s.

The first principle of Heidegger is about technology, Heidegger thinks that The over development of technology has made natural things, such as trees and soil, into materials that promote technologies' progress rather than valuable individuals. Meanwhile, he thinks that the art would be the only way to fight back the over development of the technology. In his opinion, the modern art has been ruined by the technology, so people can only put their hope on the future art, which in his opinion would be much more poem; the future art must be poetic. This would be the major explanation for why Malick choose to make his film become more poetic by using the cinematographies.

4.2. Advocates the myth of origin

Secondly, Heidegger advocates the myth of everything' s origin. He focuses on where people come from and mostly the original of the everything in the world. It is also related with the death of the organisms. "born to die" is a essential principle of Heidegger' s Existentialism[2]. He thinks as people will always worry about everything when they are alive, they will arrange themselves in a more effective way when they still exist and make decisions not regretful of the present and the future. The "death", as an inevitable end of all human, becomes the motivation for people to live effectively. This principle emphasize on importance of every decision made in human' s life, which it thinks are all important. This influenced Malick to devote himself on developing character' s thoughts and making decision in their turning point of the life, and accept all action they made regardless of social values.

4.3. advocate for poetic affected

Thirdly, Heidegger' s principle on advocating for the poetic affected Malick in a strongest way. The "poetic film" is defined by a film with ambiguity and as pure expression from the director himself, there also need to be some digression from the main line of the film and lead out some personal thinking[3]. Besides, Poetic films need to be much more subjective than the normal narrative films with director' s personal features. This explain one of the development in the content of Malick' s film--the style of script. In "Badlands", there is still a strong storyline that are studied from the typical American Road Movies, and the two main characters are running away after doing a massive killing. They experience a lot of events during their journey and finally learn an idea. The whole film has a very clear storyline with some twists. However, the seed of making a poetic film has already planted inside the "Badlands". Along with depicting the dramatic twists in the film, Malick chose to show the audience with irrelevant scenes to main story. This choice made the film' s pace become slower and increased the ambiguity of the core value. The audience can' t get a clear idea from the director of whether they are doing right or wrong. Instead, the using of the peaceful moment provided audience a time to reflect by themselves during watching. In "Days of heaven", Malick' s story turns to be more blurred and different from the typical Hollywood way of narrating. There is still some very severe twist such as the fire in the land and the main character kills the landlord in the end. But the arrangement of those twists are more casual. The story doesn' t follow a typical way with a climax and a button in the first half of the film. Malick chose to show the daily life in the farmland and put the conflict in the next half part. This is a sign of turning the story to become more poetic as there were a random complication of the events happening. However, story line was not erased in the film, and the conflicts existed. When Malick comeback with "The thin red line", the style of narrating became completely. The whole script is more like a documentary instead of a film with story. More energy and time is focused on what the soldiers the showing of the cruelty of the war, which is not show by the specific plot but by the scene in and after the battle. The style of narrating turns into the expression of the character' s thoughts, which would be director' s understanding and beliefs on this war. In his next two films, especially in "The tree of life", he put his own living experience in the film, which was the final evidence that he is fully replacing the film with his own idea[4]. This explains why his film become harder to understand gradually, which is a change in his style.

A deeper understanding of the philosophy make his film become more conceptual and ambiguous. The three principles didn' t occur separately, but as a combination

which reflected in every films, changing his style of narrating a story to expressing feeling, exploring stories and social background to mental conflict and humanity.

5. ALTERNATION OF MALICK'S TECHNIQUES

5.1. Camera movement

The cinematography is used in his film to create the poetic feeling and express his philosophy beliefs. The camera movement, is used to improve the randomness of the film. The moving camera doesn't not have a pattern, which means that it tends to encounter the events happen naturally rather than show the events artificially designed. In this case, the poetic came from a flash of inspiration. In the film, the inspiration was any element on the screen seen by the audience. A flexible camera movement tend to capture more content that is going to happen on the screen than fixed position[5].

Another type of shot Malick chose in later works were wide shots. This type of shot is a way to combine the characters and the environment together, which shows Malick's principles' on environment. Moreover, wide shot contains the information as much as possible, thus capture the much more uncertain things. The voiceover shows that in the environment, the individual thoughts are still valuable, which come from the existentialism that Malick advocate from the beginning. The more voice over in the recent films is a evidence of him showing more visual environment and put the characters in the sound level.

5.2. From Realism to Naturalism: changing usage of light in Malick's film

The best way to conclude Malick way of light usage in his first two film was strictly follow the realism cinematographic lighting techniques. The realism lighting technique derived from Andre Bazin's statement: "the film is not complete equals to objective truth in real world, it contains filmmakers' and creators' own understanding of the objects in films, and reconstruct it in the screen. The cinematography is the method to make this reconstructed reality seems to be true." The realism way of lighting follow this tenet, as using the light to create a feeling of truth[6]. The "Days of heaven" is a classic sample of realism light usage. The most distinct trait was that it relinquish the artificial light in shooting, completely used the camera setting and natural light source to create images. As a result, the film is a totally product of nature.

However, in the late 90s, as another style of lighting, naturalism, came on to the stage. This was the time Malick shot "The thin red line", which was a work like watershed of his style. It somehow influence the lighting in "the thin red line". One of the principle in Naturalism

lighting express the "impulse of emotion through light, this include application of colorful light as well as light in extreme angle. Although the omen of adapting natural light is not obvious in "the thin red line", there were two trends concluded from this film and later two.

Firstly, a development in lighting technique was "back-lighting". Although audience and scholars may regard "back-lighting" as the feature of all Malick's films' light usage. The advancement of the back-lighting still happened in his films. For example, the usage of the back-lighting is more static and formal in his first two films, but in "The new world" and "The tree of life", the backlighting usage is much more flexible and also more frequent.

The stable light setting was setted, which means Malick wanted to control the appearance of the image. In contrast, when the backlights are dynamic, it image was out of control. Malick hand out the image into the light, this thus shows his respect of natural. Thus, The backlighting is more likely to show a feeling instead of being a symbol. This verify the conclusion that Malick turn to expression of pure feeling in later film.

Secondly, another trait is the usage of natural light, The usage of the nature light, shows that Malick wants to show an interaction between the characters and the environment. For the artificial light, it is a symbol of designed event. In contrast, natural light shows that the story is real with a lot of uncertainty in the environment.

5.3. Revelation of thoughts: evolving voice over

In "Badlands", the voice-over came from single character, which is a way Malick used to explain the plot. In "The thin red line", the voice-over filled the entire film. Specifically, when the film was portraying the nature scene, there was voice-over; when the soldiers in the film are fighting, there was also voice-over; even when they are thinking, voice-over appeared. This feature was completely inherited by his next film "the new world", and was magnified in "the tree of life" and the succeeded films. In the latter, these voice-over came from all the characters without signs. The audience has no way of knowing which character these voice-overs belong to. This kind of usage of voice-over usage only appears in Malick' s film that time. The voice over is the exploration in of characters' mind: The screen that audience can see could be regarded as one dimension of the film, and Malick put more energy in showing natural and environment scene on the screen, which are all external backgrounds. Thus, there must be another dimension showing the inner of the characters, and the sound dimension of the film serves as this function.

6. CONCLUSION

In this paper, by analyzing the change and poetry via Malick's image to summarize different thoughts of images or films. The environment and historical factors impact on the films, the Malick's image style formed in the different situations. The researcher only analyzed reasons of the Malick's image in this essay, there are other influential factors which may impact on the films, in the future, the thoughts of different types films may be discussed as well.

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