

A. Van Jordan

A House Is Not a Home: The Farmer's House Holds Passion in *Days of Heaven*

TERRENCE MALICK'S *DAYS OF HEAVEN* BEGINS WITH A DREAM FOR freedom. It's 1916, and Bill (Richard Gere), like many young men of any era, needs to escape his life. He has responsibilities—a girlfriend, Abby (Brooke Adams); a little sister, Linda (Linda Manz)—and so he also needs to find work. But he just had an altercation on his job, a good job in a steel mill in Chicago, which resulted in the death of the foreman. It was an accident—he didn't mean to kill him—so Bill sets out for the Texas Panhandle to work crops and to start over. For a white male in the pre-Jazz Age of America, it would be reasonable to see this as a viable plan, as long as you stayed out of trouble.

Bill, however, has a quick temper, a quality that does not play well when the work calls for living communally with both your co-workers and their families. In order for Bill not to raise suspicion—he is, after all, on the lam—he tells his coworkers that both Linda and his girlfriend Abby are his sisters. In a way, they are all three orphans in the world without family other than one another, but with long days of work and long nights under the stars for weeks on end, this becomes a charade that they don't have the stamina to maintain. Once a wealthy farmer (Sam Shepard), who has a terminal ailment that is never quite defined, shows interest in Abby, Bill decides that this may be their ticket to a comfortable life. If only Abby can pretend to love The Farmer until he dies, which would allow her to inherit both his wealth and his beautiful house.

It's a house that cannot be forgotten once seen. It emerges from the fields with the allure and mystery of that black monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and if all goes according to plan, Bill, Abby, and Linda will live there happily ever after.

In Roger Ebert's review of the film in 1997, he makes a statement that responds to some criticism of the film upon its initial release in 1978:

Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* has been praised for its painterly images and evocative score, but criticized for its muted emotions: Although passions erupt in a deadly love triangle, all the feelings are somehow held at arm's length. . . . But watching this 1978 film again recently, I was struck more than ever with the conviction that this is the story of a teenage girl, told by her, and its subject is the way that hope and cheer have been beaten down in her heart. We do not feel the full passion of the adults because it is not her passion: It is seen at a distance, as a phenomenon, like the

weather, or the plague of grasshoppers that signals the beginning of the end.

While I believe there's some truth to this, I don't believe that Malick, a filmmaker who has been as devoted to ensemble casts as he has been to sublime settings, would reduce the emotional resonance of a film down to a single character's point of view. I also believe that there's a great deal of passion in this film and not simply that which is evoked through the lighting and setting, either.

My objection to Ebert's assertion is that he suggests that the emotional charge of the film has to come from *one* of these characters alone. To ask which character drives the emotion of this film seems like the wrong question. The emotional drive of the film strikes me more as a constellation of the drive of Bill, the desire of The Farmer, the complicity of Abby, the passion of the award-winning score, the demands of the lighting, and the controlled environment of the setting, all of which associatively guide the emotional resonance of the film.

Linda's narration of the film can lead one to ask if it's her story, but I don't think it's any more her story than *The Great Gatsby* is Nick Carraway's. In *Gatsby*, Carraway does guide our inquiry as readers, but in *Days of Heaven*, Linda's voiceover is less of a guide and more like just another of the film's many voices. Indeed, it wasn't until two years after filming *Days of Heaven* that the narration came as an idea to further anchor the story. (The production histories of Malick's many voiceovers across his films are fascinating and complex—they are not only a consistent feature of his work but also a minefield for potential interpreters.)

What we see in this film is a lesson that Malick carried with him throughout his career: The setting itself always has a central image that either guides or lures the characters. As Martin Sheen says in the documentary on Malick, *Rosy-Fingered Dawn*, "His imagery was always clear, very precise, and very actable. You could grab an image and apply it personally, and it was like walking through a path in the jungle; the path was always there, if you used that image. If I got off on my own, I'd be lost and 'actory' and pompous and fake and it never worked, but as long as I followed his imagery, I was fine."

In *Badlands*, Sissy Spacek's Holly and Martin Sheen's Kit are both in a dream, a fantasy, to escape reality through the road ahead, which lures them farther away from home and a crime committed there—much like *Days of Heaven*—but ironically points them in directions closer and closer to their demise. Martin Sheen, again in *Rosy-Fingered Dawn*, makes the case, however, that the gun in *Badlands* was *the* central image. Malick told him that the "gun is a magic wand; if you can't deal with someone it solves all your problems." It seduces his character into the fantasy of control that he imagines having as he spins increasingly out of control.

In *Days of Heaven*, the guiding image—perhaps the guiding character, in a sense—is Belvedere, the house itself, which stands imposingly at the edge of the fields where Bill, Abby, and Linda work.

"EXT. BELVEDERE—" is the header that introduces The Farmer's house, at the bottom of page ten in the screenplay of *Days of Heaven*. The house, The

Belvedere, is the “big house” on the farmer’s Bonanza on which the workers toil. Strangely, there are seldom references to time of day in the header of the original screenplay; every now and then Malick uses MAGIC HOUR, DAWN, or DUSK or leaves it blank like above. There’s never a header that reads, for instance, “EXT. BELVEDERE—DAY.” The screenplay is a much more fleshed-out story—more dialogue, more locations, more proper names for characters—than the film would lead viewers to believe. It’s clear that Malick had a clear vision for the film, despite the many rumors that the set was often improvisatory. That is not to say that the set and the days of shooting were structured and kept to the plan; indeed, I think this makes it clear that Malick had a plan and he improvised the way a musician improvises off a set of chords. The screenplay served perhaps as the chord and key for the shoot.

A great deal of description of the wheat is also offered in the revised version of the script, dated June 2, 1976:

EXT. WHEAT FIELDS—DAWN

The sun peers over the horizon. The wheat makes a sound like a waterfall. It stretches for as far as the eye can see . . .

The poetry is in the screenplay from the beginning. Throughout the script, it’s also clear that the wheat could easily become as central to the film—and, in many ways, does—as the house. Like the grass and trees in Malick’s later film *The Thin Red Line*, the wheat exists both to conceal and to protect. When the Farm Foreman, in an inspired performance by former Western star Robert J. Wilke, suspects the relationship between Abby and Bill isn’t what Bill purports it to be, he squints at them in the wheat fields. Many of the secrets of the film—Bill and Abby’s loving moments, their clandestine conversations, Bill’s contemplations—take place in the fields of wheat. The wheat fields occupy a good deal of screen time as the central image in the film, but the house is clearly a *character* within the setting, and that is why it earns a proper name in the screenplay: BELVEDERE.

The most iconic image of this story comes just over an hour into the film when the locusts come to destroy the crop. Belvedere is the three-dimensional version of Edward Hopper’s *House by the Railroad*. Malick, inspired by the paintings of Hopper, frames a shot of the Victorian house, Belvedere, in the near center of the screen with the locusts falling and swirling around five male figures in silhouette in the midrange background on the Z Axis. Belvedere is in the background beyond them, two figures on the left, three on the right, but also on the right in the foreground is Bill, whose features we can make out, only in a near silhouette. The other male figures in silhouette face outward toward the screen, two in conversation on the right cheat their shoulders half toward each other but really face forward. Bill faces the left of the screen, appearing as tall as the house and appearing almost to be addressing it. This is all cast in the glow of the golden hour; Malick dropped peanut shells from the sky to create the effect of the locusts. The composition is striking, but what’s important here is that, in the way the shot is composed, Bill appears nearly equal in size to Belvedere. We know the showdown between The Farmer and Bill is not far away. It’s almost

as if Bill has yet again brought destruction to the scene, and he's taking up too much space. He's too big for the synecdoche of The Farmer/Belvedere, his home.

Malick didn't settle for a façade of this house for the film. He had it built to spec, as a Victorian home just before World War I. This house has the utility, soundness, and delight that would have made Vitruvius proud. It served as a setting and as a practical, usable space for the actors and crew on the set. Belvedere is not just another point within this constellation, rather it's another pulsing presence in this many-centered film. Malick is clear on the importance of what the house represents. He uses it as a central reflector of the motivations of the three characters: The Farmer understands that the house will be attractive to Abby, even if he is, as he believes, not long for this world; Bill sees the house as a symbol of the big take for which he's been waiting his whole life; and Abby finds love, surprisingly, in the house with The Farmer, enjoying the comforts of home.

In the "Making Space" chapter of Witold Rybczynski's *The Most Beautiful House in the World*, Rybczynski makes this point, riffing off of Vitruvius: "Commodity, firmness, and delight had to be combined, and the art of the architecture consisted in doing this in such a way that the three became indistinguishable—that is, the various elements of the building had to incorporate all three *at the same time*."

Belvedere incorporates not only the three tenets of architecture based on Vitruvius's classical treatise but also manages to incorporate all three of the key characters' desires. There may be many individual images that a viewer will find striking in a Malick film, but I'm always looking for that image that seems indispensable. The wheat fields offer a great deal of delight on screen and they're nimble in their use and resilient in their soundness, but Belvedere, The Farmer's house, stands above other elements of setting as both a singular image and a singular character. It allows Abby to separate from Bill. It becomes a barrier for Bill once he's suspected of his subterfuge. It even keeps Linda away from her true brother. The house is a metaphor, of course; it's a functioning house while it also functions as an image of a *home*, a home that for Bill, Abby, and Linda remains on the horizon and just beyond their reach.