

Identification of a character

It may at times have occurred to you, dear reader, to doubt somewhat the accuracy of one idea which says: to read a book, for a good reader means to comprehend the essence of the other person, his way of thinking, a desire to understand the other person and maybe make him a friend.

Perhaps you yourself, dear reader, would be in a position of an examiner, watching a movie or reading a book. What am I looking at? Where am I and can I call the experience of comprehending information in the position of a friendly third man who was raised out of conversation between myself and a movie or book? Perhaps you yourself have concealed a secret of disbelief, that in its joy or in its pain you felt was too intimate to share with others. Perhaps neither case applies to you and your life, and yet you are acquainted with that doubt; like a fleeting shape, it has drifted through your mind now and then. A doubt like this comes and goes and no one knows whence it comes or whither it goes. I, myself, have always been rather heretically minded on this nosey point and therefore early in my life developed the habit of making observations and investigations as well as possible.

For guidance, either I delved into many books and after reading them I would have a breathless scream, whispering: what really knocks me out is a book that, when you're reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it, or I would watch a movie and dream to jump on to the ship breaking the third dimension and appearing on the stage of cinema theatre somewhere in the center of Moscow in front of my eyes and the eyes of my comrades. Consequently, every time I found a contradiction between what I saw and where I've been. I would not make a friendship with a writer, or a director.

Here, my dear reader, I am forced to take a pause and confess to you. Before starting this diary-essay-confession-investigation-fake-love letter, I've stopped to watch movies, and yes, I've stopped reading prose, however not poetry (but more about that later). It was a conscious choice of mine. You see, as soon as I watch a film, I am ready to quote Virginia Woolf in a reverse way. «We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it. As we gaze we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence. The horse will not knock us down. The king will not grasp our hands. The wave will not wet our feet.»

*The horse will knock us down.
The king will grasp our hands.
The wave will wet our feet.*

You see, my dear reader, I do not watch films, because most of the time, I do not see film, or better to say, I do not know who is watching the film, and I am sincerely scared to have a couple of stones in my pockets in front of a white screen full of water.

I guess, I fit well to the definition of a naïve reader by Herman Hesse...

But, but one day it was just such unexpected good fortune that in a most curious manner put me in the possession of the tapes I hereby have the honor to present to the reading public. In these tapes which almost didn't survive and still it is just a miracle

that we still have something to be happy with, I've found a voice of a legendary film director – Terrence Malick.

Surprisingly enough, I soon found that these tapes were long lost commentaries to the great debut of Malick – BADLANDS. A movie of enormous power containing the question of a medium in itself. I remember that the first time I saw it I was wondering about the quality of a chair under my bottom. I was trying to find the ground under my body. This movie was not projected on the screen but was equally spread all over my body, eyes, ears and hair. Overtaking my promise to unveil the reason of my apostasy in front of films and books in favor of poetry, I can tell that this movie was a catalyst of my decision. In the case of this movie-badlands-experience I could not find my long-trodden way of connecting with the art. I didn't find a hero to follow, a story to be with, character in a development of which you can be emotionally involved or character development through which you could find an emotional connection. No, I have found a reflection of myself, and a reflection of myself in a dialogue with the author. Then he moved on, and I followed behind him. This movie reminded me of the way one deals with poetry: the trace of the artist is so present that you start to have a conversation with the author in which you have a chance to unveil yourself. My dear reader, here I have a pleasure for the first time to unbar the tapes.

Terrence Malick: «Nonsense, I mean that among these works of platitudes about Sergei Eisenstein, stuck the opinion that by refusing a traditional plot and psychologically developed characters, he deprived the possibility for the viewer to identify with the screen! Is it true the last? Let's focus on the idea that the artist, willy-nilly self-portrays himself in the structure of the product, and throughout the session viewer experiences identification with the author? And this process is not more "totalitarian" than selfless identification with the characters! Or let's put the question in the other way around, do we need such a thing as character identification?»

Survived tapes minutes 19-22. – where the author finds confluence between form and context and speaks about poetry.

Terrence Malick: «As Eisenstein once famously mentioned: form is a measure of content, here we can add some ideas from another Russian Victor Shklovsky, he was busy with the idea of confluence between cinema and poetry. Wait. I'll find my notes. Yes. There it is.

The main difference between poetry and prose may lie in greater geometrical methods, in poetry for example a number of random semantic permissions replaced by a purely formal geometric resolution; as if technique went through geometrization; for example verse of *Eugene Onegin* is permitted by the fact that the last two lines rhyme with each other thereby interrupting the previous system of rhyming and changing of content. Such a clumsy translation but the best from what I could find. Anyhow, you've got the idea, in short: we can use formal elements, instead of using semantic ones, and this is a poetic technique, it helped me to come up with the idea of framing for this film.»

Dear reader, this comment supposedly belongs to the moment happening between minute 19 and minute 22. Execution of a dog. Hollie speaks: «Then, sure enough, Dad found out I'd been running around behind his back. He was madder than I'd seen him. As punishment for deceiving him, he went and shot my dog». The hall scene consists of only 7 shots. The Dog walks into bushes, medium shot of Holly watching in front, Father goes into the frame looking backwards, dogs point of view and shot, Holly runs away and father drops the bag with the dead animal into the water. Each shot has minimum visual information in itself, each shot is dry. Let's add an unemotional voiceover on top of the image and as a result we will get something that we can call a documentation or in a different way: framing.

Terrence Malick: «In my movie characters do not think very much about the killing that takes place, but that the film does. Charles Starweather, Kit's prototype, wasn't the first serial killer in US, but he was the first one who would project this very, very disarming image, everybody could kind of relate to him, you know, his murder spree aside .he was very very interesting and he gave us an inside kind of glimpse into the very worst part of ourselves and yet it was so engrossing ..his character, his image of himself and it made the country kind of step back a little bit and say that we are more into the image than reality. As much as our film is made up of moments of framing that leads to feeling, rather than close scrutiny of characters that leads to identification.»

Before I present the rest of the survived tapes to you my dear reader, I will need to make a small intermission and tell you why I said that lately I was mostly interested in reading poetry without paying so much attention towards prose or cinema. In a way, this quote which was found by Terrence Malick inevitably leads me to it.

Terrence Malick: «On the contrary to prose, poetry walks around her subject creating phantoms of her victim, phantoms which later will serve as an object for detailed explorations of it. Poetry is more accurate, precise and even more gentle than prose. Poetry does not violate the border of her subject. Poetry behaves well giving us the freedom of pleasurable choice, being sincere in our desire to recognize a phenomena in front of us. As Merab Mamardashvili once said: Poetry is a sense of a self-existence, where we face not the trajectory of somebody else's way but our own.»

Survived tapes: minutes 27 – 30 – where the author discovers the «landscape».

Kit's voice: «That's the end of the message. I run out of things to say».

Terrence Malick: «Jerzy Grotowski said that the action must be unstable, action should escape. Look at the character of M. Sheen, watch how he moves, how hunched his back is, how quick the orbits of his eyes are. What do we find in him? His actions elude us. We see the murders that he commits ,but do we find a content in them? Did I want to direct the attention of the viewer, no, I've chosen the other option of mine, my strategy was in contrast to disperse the viewer's attention. Psychology of my heroes stretched over the landscape where they are running. Sometimes I even think that the story around Kit and Holly was merely an opportunity to show the space around them to make a reverse move towards the landscape by which they are surrounded, towards the light whereby they cast the shadows on the ground.»

Dear reader, here I am forced to interrupt Mr. Malick and share with you some of my own little observations. Did you notice whilst watching Badlands the quality of his light, light which has a bronze quality and the quality of a landscape which is naturally wild but calms itself down with its immense vastness. Psychology is taken to the outside world: it is reflected in a kind of landscape architecture. This landscapes talks, my dear reader, moreover, this landscapes talks to us in a direct way, bypassing the character and not forcing us to speculative sympathize .And lets be honest, can we sympathize with the « hero» or do we have somebody to sympathize with?

Here we need to listen Terence Malick himself.

Survived tapes: minutes 27-30 – where the author finds a lack of perspective.

Terrence Malick : «I am not busy with the creation of a mythology around my heroes, here I would love to even correct myself a bit, let's just forget and trash the word hero. Badlands are not following the tradition of «Bonnie and Clyde», far far away from it, on the contrary this movie deconstructs the idea of myth. Here, I am trying to speak about

perspective, let's see, Holly, her voiceover realizes that she is in the race, from a metaphysical point of view as much as a pragmatic one. They will be caught by police, this is inevitable, we all know it. Both she and Kit hope to leave some sort of mark on the world. You'll see it very clearly in the end. They hope to make their existence meaningful for all to share in it. More than a fair desire in the world of «*Bonnie and Clyde*» but not in ours, the lack of perspective from which Kit looks like quite an individual averages all his attempts for the self canonization. Art works with the perspective by means of which we are able to create a myth out of normality. But what if you do not have an «art-perspective»?»

My dear reader here I need to confess and share with you some of my own anxieties which I've experienced whilst watching this movie. Did you notice one extremely interesting fact: in the world of «Badlands» you will never find a mother figure. Neither Kit nor Hollie has a mother. They are lonely in the wilderness of impossibility, to create contact with the world which comes through the stage of separation from the mother figure. More than that, in the world of «Badlands» all your attempts to find a women will fail. And let me be quite reckless, but I dare to assume that you also will not find differences between sexes in general! Hollie is a fifteen years old girl and Kit is a twenty five year old impotent. Hollie represents the female body in the search of identification, which she finds is a typical behavior of a school girl without any reference to sexuality, with the strong desire of romanticized relationships towards her idealized man. But does she know the rules of the game without any sexual education in her life? Being excluded from the mother and Kit who masks himself with the character of James Dean—American hero of the 50's, playing the strong role of a male but with the dysfunctional and strayed idea of connection with anybody else except the image of a man in a blue jeans and a red leather jacket on the screen. Indeed they cannot be heroes representing themselves but perhaps they can be a representation for somebody or something else? They both have their own individual qualities as models, I was more fascinated by qualities of Kit (somehow, my dear reader, I dare to assume that Hollie plays a certain role of a mirror towards Kit's actions, she absorbs his physicality, further translating it in her own personal naïve story), but Kit, Kit and his animalism with speed and physical agility purifying the void of a Badlands. What is it for, my dear Reader?

Survived tapes: minutes 47-51 – where author continues to speak about landscape and other things.

Terrence Malick : «Look, characters of *Badlands* are immune toward the landscape, on contrary with landscape towards them. Here, I will read couple of quotes from Emerson's essay *Nature*, this book helped me to rediscover the significance of a landscape, of an earth in my movie. I was able to establish, let's say, a non-relationship between a man and a landscape. Here it goes: Nature, in its ministry to man, is not only the material, but is also the process and the result. All the parts incessantly work into each other's hands for the profit of man. The wind sows the seed; the sun evaporates the sea; the wind blows the vapor to the field; the ice, on the other side of the planet, condenses rain on this; the rain feeds the plant; the plant feeds the animal; and thus the endless circulations of the divine charity nourish man, thus the eye is the best of artists. By the mutual action of its structure and of the laws of light, perspective is produced, which integrates every mass of objects, of what character soever, into a well colored and shaded globe, so that where the particular objects are mean and unaffecting, the landscape which they compose, is round and symmetrical. And as the eye is the best composer, so light is the first of painters. There is no object so foul that intense light will not make beautiful. And the stimulus it affords to the sense, and a sort of infinitude which it hath, like space and time, make all matter gay. Even the corpse has its own beauty. Omne verum vero consonant which means every truth agrees with every other truth. Each Creature is only a modification of the other; likeness in them is more than the difference, and their radical law is one and the same.»

My dear reader, I also challenged myself and got acquainted with Ralph Emerson's essay and I've noticed one more interesting peculiarity, Emerson very often refers to the eye, which is the link between man and nature and is also the «I». What we see is what we can comprehend. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. But my dear reader we are in a quite a problematic position here, because between us and nature, between us and characters we have a light-filled rectangle. Now we are in a position of a ménage-a-trois, where we have a man (our characters), a nature and a third element- the camera! But, but we also can solve such a delicate situation like this! Kit and Hollie are married to the landscape. Let's be creative and let us imagine the body of an exhausted couple after many years of living together, they are so skinny and ugly that at some point you don't know who you are kissing in a coffin, your grandmother or your grandfather! Back on the road of seriousness, I assume that you had the same feeling as I did while watching Badlands, I didn't see the characters but I saw a landscape which pulled the psychology of people acting inside it. And here I will make my statement, Badlands is almost a visual note to the philosophy of transcendentalism, where nature plays the role of unfolding God which gives us his presence through the presence of a rock under our shoes and a house raised out of the earth. And we can see it only through our eye which, I am not scared to say, is educated by Terrence Malick's camera.

Survived tapes: minutes 5 -10 – where the author is grasping the idea of distance.

Terrence Malick: «By emphasizing the visual tone over the physical presence, by prioritizing the aesthetic over the athletic, the movement of camera over the movement of character, we reformulate the hierarchy of self and image. Image here contains the self.

In two shots near the beginning of the film, we notice how the image contains character rather than the other way round, we see a total image, screen itself rather than a part like a character. Here we watch Kit in medium long shot, first walking along the street trying to balance a brush in the palm of his hand, and in the second after a dissolve separating the two shots, we observe him crushing a can. In each instance we observe the action rather than identify with it; where in the next shot the medium close-up shows Kit looking at something, and our position is closer to identification than observation. However, the next shot which shows us what Kit must have been looking at – Holly playing in the garden – also shows Kit walking into the shot in a device familiar to us from the work of Tarkovsky and other modernist masters. The conventional point of view shot becomes the unconventional distancing device, or rather reflective device as we observe Kit going over to Holly. We observe them!»

Here my dear reader I need to stop to tell you and show you the object which I have next to the tape recorder on my table. It is a picture of a man taken 31 years before Badlands appeared on the screens in the US and far more than 32 before I've found these tapes. What am I looking at right now? It is the face of a man, skinny face. It is the face of a man with eyes that watched how hands were writing:

This is how hunger begins:
The morning you wake, feeling lively,
Then begins the weakness,
Then begins the boredom;
Then comes the loss
Of the power of quick reason,
Then comes the calmness
And then begins the horror.

How should I look at the face of this man? Should I identify myself with his hunger? But I just had lunch. Should I protect myself in front of his eyes gazing at me and identify

myself with his torturer? No, I cannot, otherwise this jouissance would not allow me to continue my work and this sentence. But what I can do is to use my EXPERIENCE and take a look at this picture as just a picture of a very skinny hungry man without having a story behind my eyes. I do not know that he is a Russian poet unjustly sentenced to death, I do not know that he will die in less than a month but I know that in front of me is a picture which I can frame with only my own experience. I want to take a pensive position that wants to frame the question of violence without either objectifying or adrenalizing it.

Terrence Malick: «Landscape has a specific quality of being horizonless. Do you know the difference between the forest and the park? In the park you know that park is finite.»

My dear reader, once again I have to share with you my reflections. I just glanced at my notebook in which I found the following lines: this film can be as wide as my experience would allow it to be. This film has the quality of stretched elastic. Mr. Malick doesn't lead us through the classical way of identifying with the characters, which in the end would help throughout the length of the movie, but on the contrary he frames the situations in which characters themselves exist only as a reflection of a landscape which we can extend-fill-enrich-justify with only our own perspective. And far more important than this, in the end we articulate ourselves with the experience of being in front of the image. We were not enslaved by film but we were liberated by the responsibility of articulation due to the inability of expression of the characters.

Survived tapes: minutes 76-82 – where the author starts to speak about the problem of being well articulate.

Terrence Malick «The boy unable even to fill a sixty-second recording in a vandalized Record-Your-Own-Voice booth. It can be an ironic moment for the audience to laugh at Kit's inarticulacy but what's more important is to try to find a way of feeling that is shared but once removed from a comprehension greater than what the characters can express. This can result in accusations of patronizing the characters on the one hand but can also suggest compassion – compassion in the sense not of the Latin root as explored by Milan Kundera in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, but how he describes its meaning in German, Polish, Russian and other languages. As he differentiates between compassion as pity and compassion as fellow feeling. Here is his quote, «All languages that derive from Latin form the word "compassion" by combining the prefix meaning "with" (com-) and the root meaning "suffering" (Late Latin, passio). In other languages, Czech, Polish, German, and Swedish, for instance - this word is translated by a noun formed of an equivalent prefix combined with the word that means "feeling".

In languages that derive from Latin, "compassion" means: we cannot look on coolly as others suffer; or, we sympathize with those who suffer. Another word with approximately the same meaning, "pity", connotes a certain condescension towards the sufferer. "To take pity on a woman" means that we are better off than she, that we stoop to her level, lower ourselves.

That is why the word "compassion" generally inspires suspicion; it designates what is considered an inferior, a second-rate sentiment that has little to do with love. To love someone out of compassion means not really to love.»

And here you can see how helpful this idea was to me. Our method of framing works in two directions. First of all, it allows us to observe characters but at the same time it allows us to make a step back and create a distance which we can fill with «compassion». Coming back to the Kit, yes it is true that the boy can not articulate himself, some psychologists would justify his murderousness as an attempt to express himself and here they would make a big mistake. The murders of Kit are not his expressions towards the world, but his lack of imagination, do you remember what

Hollie asks him when he shot his friend. «How is he doing?» . We need the distance in order to be there. I mean to be in this space next to them. Otherwise we would not be able to even see them. How old are you, 25? I guess at the age 11 you still didn't read the criminal chronicles, but your parents did I bet. And when they saw the pictures of Charles Starkweather and his girlfriend Caril Ann Fugate on the front page of the newspaper, and when they read what these kids have done. Do you believe that they were able to see them?»

My dear reader I am again sitting in front of desk and again see the scribbles in my notebook. «That is why I was scared, because I could see? This movie was an unexpected reminder? But did I ask for it? Did I ask this movie to remind me that we still are able to see the reality? Was it scary?»

Terrence Malick: «I can summarize this film as an act of being surprised by reality. This film represents by itself a special form of a poetic revealing, represents the feeling of being born, represents our long time ago forgotten feeling of being, feeling of finiteness and death. But my Dear Listener, many people can accuse me in aestheticization of violence, they can accuse me with the light coming to the frame, with the landscape making my frame vaster, with the nature allowing me to place the story in her dominions. And here I would love to remind you that aestheticization was a core part of a Christian narratives, through which western civilization could perceive the suffering and anguish of a human being. I am not doing something generally new, conversely I am trying to go back to our roots.»

Survived tapes: minutes 90-94. – where the author speaks about liberation of the form.

Terrence Malick :«Once old Pachero gave to his pupil advise «The image should stand out from the frame.» . What we've tried to reach is to create a spectacle as an observation. Here I found very inspiring the work of Diego Velazquez *Las Meninas*. What he has made there is not that it is represented within the space of the painting and still we have no power of evading out of the territory of this work. Artists himself is stuck between two incompatible appearances. This is the case, as if the artist could be simultaneously visible in the picture, where he is depicted, and see for himself the picture in which he is trying to portray something. I will read to you the very end of Michel Foucault essay about this painting: «Perhaps there exists, in this painting by Velazquez, the representation as it were, of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us. And, indeed, representation undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being. But there, in the midst of this dispersion which it is simultaneously grouping together and spreading out before us, indicated compellingly from every side, is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation - of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance. This very subject - which is the same - has been elided. And representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form» .»

My dear reader here the tapes with Terrence Malick's voice come to an end. The rest is a short monologue from the interviewer ,whose name we could not decrypt. But what we could do is guess: his age, his social position in life, his sex, the color of his eyes. In the end: 25 years old, student, male, brown color with a drop of blackness close to the cornea. Of course now, after this type of information we can not judge him or be even slightly surprised by his piety towards Malick.

Interviewer. Ending of the found tapes.

Interviewer: «To read a book, for a good reader is to comprehend the essence of an other person, his way of thinking, a desire to understand the other person and maybe make him a friend. This is a slightly changed quote from Hermann Hesse. You know, I was just having a talk with Terrence Malick. Oh my goodness! Well, I don't know how to say it better but I have a feeling inside my gut .. that we didn't turn our talk into a friendship. And how can you do it if you speak to the person by phone?! Gee man. It is strange to see yourself in front of a mirror talking with Malick. It's pity that my phone is in the corridor. I guess he is fucking fat. His breathing is quite heavy. Ha. In a mirror I could see my reflection and, what's even more funny I could see how I've adopted myself to him even if he was in Texas, and I am not. The strange thing is the distance. I could not see him but I could see his film. Here and there you have a distance. Here and there you need to fill it. But did I meet Terence or did I just meet my idea of him and reflect it? I definitely didn't meet Kit and Holly, that I know for sure. Maybe I've met my own reflection in them. As much as they were dissolved into a landscape, I've been dissolved in a square of cinema. What Terrence Malick has done is simply that he just changed a perspective. If before we could go in to the picture, then now the picture goes into us, almost like an orthodox icon opening itself towards a worshiper. Maybe it is not we who identify with the screen but the screen who identifies with us? Can I call it therapeutic, no it's too tough not to see a creator and his creatures. I guess you just feel lonely with the pure form.. identification is a constant creation where you need to be aware of it but at least it's visible.»

Epilogue.

This tape has never been revealed before. My name is Roman Ermolaev and after a big research I found out that it was faked by a person named Namor Vealomre. What was the reason of making this fraud? Unfortunately we can only guess. Namor is not with us anymore. Probably it was a desire to find a root of a void in a film of Malick by bringing him back to life. Probably it was an attempt of a witty type of a game. Probably it was research on the idea of identification with the auteur, this constantly blinkering mirage. An attempt to stabilize the image in your head. An attempt to construct an image which you can hold in your head. The impossible desire. The image can not be frozen in a momentum. Or you have a story which is told through the character, either you have a story where your own personality is forced on the screen. Anyway, it is the idea of process, that is why identification is as natural as time of your being, as your desire to stop it and breath. One responsibility which you have is to be aware of this mechanism hidden in yourself. You need to be aware of an idea of inception. No. Again. This tape has never been revealed before. My name is Namor Vealmore and after a big research I found out that it was faked by a person named Roman Ermolaev. Is it possible to find the reason for this fake? Fortunately we can make some guess-work. Roman is not with us anymore but what can we say about this fraud? Probably it was a wish, a desire to release a hidden force behind the movie screen. Probably it was an attempt to release the idea of identification, to figure out the way how you can be absorbed with the movie and still stay who you are, despite the huge fight happening between you and a line of 24 frames per second. But can you? No, you can not. Film is a process of lingering. Film is a process. And during this process you can not escape the transformation or reincarnation in a parallel with a film. You will be forced to change the skin under the pressure of a movie. You will identify yourself with hero, director, cameraman with yourself if cinema is able to bring you the mirror. One last thing which could possibly stop it is a humour. Calm and confident smile which is not a sarcastic grinning but a gentle alarming of a present moment. This way of a humour could bring a certain quality of an estrangement method. It would create a "vision" of happening, and not the "recognition". It would also bring an extra quality of deepness in a process of an experience. But for it we need to have an effort and a will. Because only with this trio; humour, effort, and will, we would be able to liberate an independent way of looking at art. No. Again. This tape has never been revealed before. My name is Roman Ermolaev and after a big research I found out that it was faked by a person named Roman Ermolaev. The reason of this fraud seems very clear to me. It is an essay with the target to understand the way of being in front of a film. The swindler was trying to figure out the way of making a contact with the movie.

Usually it is quite a simple task. You have a character which leads you through the experience from the beginning to the final credit. But in a badlands this small trick did not work. A task appeared to be much more complicated. Badlands was made in a completely different way than anything else before it. This movie rejected to lead you anywhere, except if you would not take a responsibility to find your own way of looking for the exit. Badlands has a director, actors, story, plot and everything that you have in a movie, with some addition that this movie has always a viewer at a respectful distance. The viewer has a freedom of watching the screen because he is not forcibly compelled to do it. This movie is a movie in itself. We almost see the physical object that we can walk around with evoking desire to contemplate it. This object is complete in itself and we are not able to endue it with our own personality, but we can watch it and find our own reflection on the polished surface of it. No. Again.

My dear reader, in order to keep the flow of the text, and to be aware that the form of the text is important as much as the context, the reference list is listed in the end.

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