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Reactions Against Convention: *A Man Escaped* and *Badlands* Defined Through Classical Hollywood

Art is reaction to art. Creation is in innovative continuation of the prior artistic canon or a rejection of institutions of thought. This is true for painting as it is for film, an art form that developed and blossomed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars such as David Bordwell have documented the conventions of early Hollywood film in his seminal “Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narration Principles and Procedures”, detailing the shot composition, sound editing, narration style, and vitally, plot and character development that was the style at the time. If we accept his diagnosis as true, then we can understand works in and around that time as either extensions or counterpoints of this style. Looking at films through dialectic of acceptance and change can be fruitful, yielding insights about cinematography and direction as reactionary choices. Two movies are great examples of the sides of this dichotomy: Robert Bresson’s *A Man Escaped* (1956) and Terrence Malick’s *Badlands* (1973). The formal elements of these films can be used to understand where these films fall on the point of division. *A Man Escaped* purifies but remains confined to conventional style, while *Badlands* directly recognizes but subverts classical narrative. These choices wonderfully mirror and strengthen the themes of each film, with Bresson telling a narratively confined story of a man stuck in jail and Malick a subverted narrative of two people who reject society and reality.

It is best to clarify Bordwell’s definition of the “Classical Hollywood Narrative” in order to illustrate the canon that the films react to. Bordwell wrote this article in 1986, drawing upon films created prior to 1960 to define that era of filmmaking as “Classical Hollywood.” He co-opts numerous Russian terms such as “fabula” (story) and “syuzhet” (plot) in order to construct the prototype of the Hollywood film. In neat summary, he states “the classical Hollywood film presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals” (Bordwell, 18). He goes on to say “in classical fabula construction, causality is the prime unifying principle...and motivates principles of organization” (19). Though he does not mean to subject all films to the trend of cause-effect based problem solving with understandable characters, he notes that this is the vast prevailing trend both nationally and internationally. More trends he notes are “the importance of the plot involving the heterosexual romance” with endings of

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“a display of the united romantic couple” (21). On the role of narration, he proclaims the idea of the narrator as “invisible observer,” noting that “narration knows more than any or all characters, it conceals relatively little, and it seldom acknowledges its own address to the audience,” and that “narration is so constructed that characters and their behavior produce and reiterate the necessary story data” (22 – 25). These statements are digestible, largely uncomplex, and are easily applied to films of that time; it is too easy to think of numerous examples to definitively reject Bordwell’s sweeping claims. He closes his analysis with a bold claim: “authorial difference in Hollywood thus dramatizes the range and limits of the classical paradigm [of extrinsic norms]” (32), supposing that this style of film necessarily dominates the minds of directors in that era. With these ideas in mind, let us turn towards the films that supposedly react against these institutional ideas.

Many scenes in *A Man Escaped* utilize narration, framing, and camera movement to place us within Fontaine’s body and mind and create a sense of confinement. Our protagonist Fontaine narrates the film, detailing in past tense his actions and thoughts as he attempts to escape his Nazi death cell. Though almost any scene can highlight these formal aspects of the film, as it is incredibly tight and consistent, we will focus on his first moments in a cell (7:00 – 8:17). As we fade out of black onto a pile of white, and a voice commands Fontaine to “get up!” in both German and French. Fontaine pokes his bloody head out of the covers, and narrates “instinctively, I pretended to be too weak to get up...” and he sits up. This gives us a sense of his thought process as we see his actions, bringing us into the mind of our protagonist. The camera follows his ascent almost perfectly, capturing his body waist up and cutting out the German soldiers who are only important as the “force” and not as characters. There is only a blank wall for background. As he begins to leave the cell the camera stops, showing us nothing of the outside world. The exact tracking of Fontaine’s movement places us as the direct observers of his actions, but does not allow us to see outside the cell as Fontaine moves to the left, confining us to the small world of the cell. These framing choices provide us with information of Fontaine as our protagonist and director of action, while simultaneously reinforcing the jailed atmosphere of the film. Fontaine goes on, saying “did that pathetic ruse save my life?”, another opening for the audience to get into Fontaine’s mind, while also making a clear reference to the final outcome: his escape.

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A cut brings us to a shot of the officers pushing Fontaine back into his bed, followed with a fade to Fontaine looking around and assessing his room. Within this, he narrates “My cell barely measured three metres by two, it was sparsely furnished...in a recess by the door a sanitary pail, and finally set in the wall a stone shelf. I managed to climb onto the shelf to reach the window.” As he talks the camera pans to look at the objects, sometimes narration first and camera second and vice versa. This sequence is exemplar of many moments in the film, where narration doubles the information on screen. The film emphasizes that we now all that Fontaine can know, again placing us within his world and knowledge set. The insightful narration of actions and thoughts, the tracking and restriction of the camera, and framing of characters and important scenes come together to characterize Fontaine and his actions while imprisoning the viewer within the confines of the cell.

In contrast, *Badlands* utilizes narration, sound mixing, and color to create a sense of openness and otherworldliness. The moment of Kit’s capture, as narrated by Holly, is exemplar of the atmosphere and composition of the film (1:21:13 – 1:22:20). As the scene opens, Holly’s narration begins:

“Often I've wondered what was going through Kit's head before they got him and why he didn't make a run for it while he still had the chance. Did he figure they'd just catch up with him the next day? Was it despair? He claimed to having a flat tire, but the way he carried on about it, I suspect this is false.”

We see Kit driving and looking at the mirror, putting on a hat before suddenly coming to a stop. He comes to a stop, jumps out, shoots his tire, and hops onto the car and checks his pulse. Notably, this sequence of events seems to be entirely motivated by Holly’s narration, with the shooting of the tire seeming like a major artistic interpretation. Do we really have insight into Kit’s actions and thoughts beyond what Holly “suspects”? Can we believe these on screen events and go against the word of Kit himself? The scene continues as Kit gazes out on top of his car. A beautiful blue sky and open grasslands surround him in an frame fit for a painting. This moment recalls earlier scenes with open skies and vast lands, such as the sign painting scene with Holly’s father. In all of these moments, the striking blue of the sky and the piercing white

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of the clouds make the moment magical and mystical, with an almost surreal quality. One is reminded of how Gunning describes color in films as producing fantasy. Especially with consideration that these scenes are likely the product of Holly's speculative imagination, the overall atmosphere is one of unbelievable beauty. We then see Kit jump off the car, with the camera jumping to follow, and we watch him pile rocks up. The gentle sounds of birds chirping and the pebbles being stacked dominate the viewer, even as a car comes roaring into view from a still shot camera angle. The sound mixing places great emphasis on the small sounds of the pebbles, where shot distance and the background noise of the car play no importance in sound intensity. This again takes the audience out of the reality of the character, enhancing sounds blatantly to show us what is visually important. Narration that draws attention to the speculative nature of the scene, surreal background colors, and impossible soundscape combine together to create the scene's otherworldly atmosphere.

Both *A Man Escaped* and *Badlands*' cinematographic choices position the films respectively as extension and subversion of Bordwell's "Classical Hollywood" paradigm, mirroring the difference in overarching thematic elements. We have established that Bresson's choices allow us to embody the protagonist and feel the confinement, while Malick's choices form a fantastical haze around the events of the film. By additionally examining the plots of these films, it becomes clear how these elements fit into Bordwell's classification. In *A Man Escaped*, we are given the goal, the struggler and those who we must struggle against. The narration psychologically defines the protagonist and gives the audience an understanding of his every action. The environment is highly specified and all causal links and actions are established. The film fits within these traditional constraints almost to the point of suffocation, with the film rarely wandering out of these bounds. Everything else is stripped away, purified. These plot and story based decisions are confined to the paradigm much as Fontaine is confined, the elements are so focused on this constraint much as Fontaine is focused on his singular goal of escape. So, Bresson's choice to constrain himself to "Classical Hollywood" expertly adds a narrative aspect to the compositional atmosphere of imprisonment. Malick not only rejects this notion of confinement, but subverts it wonderfully. On the surface

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*Badlands* seems to be a stronger adherent; a romance and action packed story, two couples escaping towards the goal of freedom, the police always hot on pursuit and the struggle real. But peeling back the nominal plot reveals a relationship that is never really actualized, a goal that is never defined, and ultimately a nonsensical and anti-climactic end. Holly and Kit have no real chemistry and profound dialogue, and at the end Holly completely leaves Kit, with no final ride off into the sunset. They run away in random directions and seem arbitrary in their murders, not killing the rich man for some apparent reason. And the last scene is questioned entirely, with too much of a surreal quality and too much speculation to understand either character's motivations. Certainly not Bordwell's idea of Classical cinema. Yet, this subversion is consistent with and adds to the overall dreamy feel of the film. The actions they are taking are real and gruesome, but there seems to be a haze surrounding the film that denies the atrocities of their actions. At one point Holly feels "just kind of blah, like when you're sitting there and all the water's run out of the bathtub." This somehow eloquently captures the essence of the film: a blah that never stops, pushing one to act even as one is unaware of reality. In high contrast to the constantly driven Fontaine, Holly wanders around with Kit until one day, she no longer feels like it. Perhaps Malick's commentary on 1970s disillusioned youth and Bresson's on the transcendental human power, but nonetheless highly aware and adeptly used reactions to the "Classical Hollywood" style.

The formal and narrative construction of the two films reinforce their thematic concerns, especially when considering how they react against Classical cinema. Bresson's confinement of Fontaine's story to conventional narrative enhances the trapped composition of the film, while Malick's surreal backgrounds and imagined action helps create the fantastical unreality of the film. While both do deviate from these ideas, the plot, characters, and themes fall by and large within these schemas. One could continue this train of thought and examine further common ground, such as both films being based on true stories, or find further points of divergence, such as how Fontaine's story is largely accurate while Holly and Kit's deviates greatly from their source. We can see through these examples of how Bordwell views all "authorial difference in Hollywood [as] dramatiz[ing] the range and limits of the classical paradigm" (32). As we must understand

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auteurs as cognizant of tradition, examining new art as reaction to old conventions is not a belabored process of yesteryear, but a powerful tool to tease out the truth of the piece.

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