

PROLOGUE

A Typical Love Scene

André Bazin, in a passage celebrating Jean Renoir's *The River* (1951), explains his own definition of expressionism in cinema. According to Bazin, expressionism is the 'explicit imposition of technique on the meaning of the film', a style and a set of assumptions from which, explains Bazin, Renoir distanced himself. To illustrate his point, Bazin invites the reader to imagine a typical love scene:

The impression which the director communicates to us has two essentially different elements:

1. *The object of the scene itself, which is to say the characters, their behaviour, and their dialogue; in other words, reality in its objective time and space;*
2. *The sum of the artifices which the film maker uses to emphasize the meaning of the event, to colour it, to describe its nuances, and to make it harmonize with what precedes and follows it in the story.*

We can see easily that if it is to be a romantic scene, the set, the lighting, and the framing would not be the same as for a scene of violent sensuality. Then comes montage. The shots will be more numerous and closer for the depiction of sensuality. The romantic scene will demand two-shots at first, and the close-ups at the end will be long ones. (Bazin 1973: 105)

For Bazin, expressionism is 'any aesthetic which in this situation places more confidence in the artifices of cinematography [...] than in the reality to which they are applied' (1973: 105).

Bazin's hypothetical scene remains an instantly recognizable specimen, a familiar Hollywood norm (or combination of norms) which has been left relatively untroubled by digital technology, intensified continuity, postmodern aesthetics or any other shift in the design and execution of popular US American cinema. However, Bazin's description is not without its problems, foremost of which is his thumbnail sketch of 'reality in its objective time and space', which is uncharacteristically narrow in its focus. It is unclear whether the reduction of 'reality' to 'characters, their behaviour, and their dialogue' is Bazin's move or an effect of the scene he describes, but he seems at the very least to accept it unconsciously. Either this is Bazin's checklist for reality in cinema, or it is a presumption of the (hypothetical) film which he chooses not to question or problematize. Across literature and the arts, ecocriticism is now encouraging us to look beyond human beings in our interpretations of fiction, and an ecocritical response to Bazin's formulation would no doubt take serious issue with his phrasing.¹ And yet, as a description of a 'typical Hollywood' staging of romantic love, the passage is difficult to fault.

In the following work, I will argue that New Hollywood cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s can be understood as a significant deviation from the default anthropocentrism evoked by Bazin. Films of that period did not radically overhaul the long-standing conventions of narrative film, but they did make room for a reality – an environmental reality – beyond characters, their behaviour and their dialogue. I will go on to discuss generic, technological, ideological and industrial facets of this shift, and will respond to various manifestations of it, in films from within and beyond the canon. But before that, and after having opened with Bazin's love-scene blueprint, I would like to look briefly at three New Hollywood love scenes, and sample some ways in which films of this period departed from classical assumptions regarding the non-human world and its role in meaningful drama.

***Harold and Maude* (Hal Ashby, 1971)**

Harold and Maude tells the story of a brief love affair between Harold (Bud Court), a young man, and Maude (Ruth Gordon), who is approaching eighty. A little over half an hour into the film, as their friendship develops, Harold and Maude go on their first outing together, a development that subtly marks a transition from

acquaintanceship to courtship. The couple have been talking together in Maude's home; she asks Harold what he likes to do other than attend funerals (the macabre hobby that brought them together initially), and then a cut – comic in its abruptness – takes us to a scrapyard, where Harold and Maude incongruously and defiantly enjoy a picnic. Shortly after there is another abrupt cut, this time to a close-up of Maude; 'I like to watch things grow', she sighs plaintively. We soon learn, through a cut to a long shot, that the couple are now in a large greenhouse. Next, Harold and Maude walk leisurely through a field, discussing what flower they would like to be resurrected as, and finally the sequence ends with an extreme long shot (and zoom out) of them together in a vast cemetery; the seemingly endless rows of identical white headstones, flattened in perspective by the telephoto lens, make for an abstract coda to this series of touching vignettes.

On what terms does *Harold and Maude* invite us to understand, enjoy and sympathize with the relationship of its central characters? Primarily, I would argue, it does so on environmental terms; but not in the sense that Ashby's film prioritizes an environmentalist 'message', regarding issues such as pollution, conservation or energy sustainability. I instead suggest that the non-human world becomes significant and meaningful not simply as a reflection of Harold and Maude, but as an independent context, and one which cannot be reduced to



Figure 0.1 Falling in love: *Harold and Maude* (Paramount Pictures)

conventional notions of setting. The sequence presents a number of interesting manifestations of this: the couple choose to learn about one another through the places that each likes to dwell in; each environment offers a different permutation of wildness vis-à-vis societal order, and simplistic binaries are carefully avoided; and a person's relationship to his or her environment is posited as being both vital and unstable, open to enrichment and variation. Shot on location in northern California, the film offers a kind of geographical specificity with regard to light, climate, topography and architecture. In an important departure from the love-scene design described by Bazin, *Harold and Maude* refuses to distinguish between physical context and meaningful content.

***Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973)**

Charlie (Harvey Keitel) is a young man torn between his involvement in the criminal underworld of Little Italy and his desire to 'make up for his sins'. He has taken under his wing the wayward Johnny Boy (Robert De Niro) but has also begun a relationship with Johnny's respectable cousin, Teresa (Amy Robinson). Teresa's influence on Charlie – a restraining, maternal, near-suffocating protectiveness – is a very familiar feature of Hollywood gender politics, but one scene in *Mean Streets* gives it an ironic twist, and one which brings the physical environment to the centre of the drama. The scene comes nearly an hour into the film, much of which has been located in enclosed, cramped and often dark settings. In it, Charlie and Teresa are on a beach; initially they walk, but for most of the scene they stand beneath what appears to be a pier or jetty. Although this is never confirmed, Teresa seems to have chosen the beach as a 'romantic location', to the niggling frustration of Charlie, whose complaints about it are only half in jest. In other words, the characters *and* the director seem here to be self-conscious about the default connotations of lovers on a beach, and the tension which develops between Charlie and Teresa is consistently characterized in environmental terms.

Barely seconds into the scene, which certainly looks romantic from the start (sunlight, a gentle breeze, a languorous stroll etc.), Charlie begins to complain about their location: 'I hate the sun, let's go inside, will ya?'. His tone is knowingly childish, and increasingly so as he begins to list all the other things he hates – the ocean, the beach, the grass, the trees, the heat. But, as is so often



Figure 0.2 Resisting the setting: *Mean Streets* (Warner Bros.)

the case in Scorsese dialogue, resentment simmers beneath the surface. Teresa, as Charlie sees it, is trying to ‘trap’ him into a conventional relationship, and part of that strategy involves dictating their surroundings and the conditions within which they live their lives. So, when Charlie claims to like mountains and then flippantly declares that tall buildings (his natural environment) are the same thing, it is actually a sharp defence. Charlie looks down as he says this, anxious to hide his real annoyance. As his exchanges with Teresa become increasingly testy, the sounds of waves and sea birds become more and more prominent on the soundtrack. Most obviously, this underscores Charlie’s impatience; we have, after all, learned of his distaste for this kind of setting. But this is also a feature of the scene which draws attention to the act of filming in the pro-filmic world. It is as if Scorsese is conceding the impossibility of fully controlling the environment in which he films, an effect which is echoed in the uncertain and seemingly incomplete zooms towards and away from Charlie’s face. To return to Bazin’s formulation, not only does the ‘reality’ of the scene encompass more than the human characters, but it includes a self-awareness on the part of the characters about their relationship to the setting; also, the ‘artifices which the film maker uses to emphasize the meaning of the event’, to return to Bazin’s formulation, themselves seem to be compromised by the physical challenges of filming on a beach.

***Badlands* (Terrence Malick, 1973)**

Terrence Malick has become known for his rhapsodic celebrations of natural beauty, but although the non-human world plays an important role in *Badlands*, it is here incorporated with an irony which no longer informs the director's work. The film is narrated through the voiceover of Holly (Sissy Spacek), as she recounts her relationship and violent escapades with Kit (Martin Sheen). In the first third of the film especially, a good deal of humour is generated through the mismatching of Holly's romanticized recollection with the visual record of events. For example, shots of Kit, bored, staring at cattle, are accompanied by Holly's storytelling: 'In the stench and slime of the feedlot, he'd remember how I looked the night before, how I ran my hand through his hair and traced the outline of his lips with my fingertip'. Sometimes the chasm separating Holly's and Kit's experience of events is made evident in the action and dialogue. In one short, comic, bitter-sweet scene, Kit and Holly sit and play cards in the shade of tree, on the bank of a river. It lasts less than thirty seconds, and consists of only four lines of dialogue and one camera set-up, an impersonal medium two shot. But the scene is just as rich as those passages in *Harold and Maude* and *Mean Streets* in its disruption of formulaic love–nature correspondence.

Holly, like Teresa in *Mean Streets*, seems to have chosen the location, or at the very least is more interested in its romantic connotations than is her partner. She looks around: 'What a nice place'. Kit does not look up from his cards, but he dutifully plays along: 'Yeah, the tree makes it nice'. Undeterred by his tone, Holly labours on with the love scene: 'And the flowers... let's not pick them. They're so nice'. But Kit has gone as far as he is willing to go with this role play, and abruptly draws a line under it: 'It's your play'. *Badlands* gently mocks its characters' responses to their natural surroundings, but also leaves us unsure as to which viewpoint we are closer to. Do we choose to share Holly's adolescent dreaminess, or Kit's weary impatience? Holly is a naïve fifteen-year-old girl, and it is hard not to instinctively sympathize with her in these early stages, but is her response to the environment really any more heartfelt than Kit's? Just as he is distracted by cards, she seems to be distracted by the *connotations* of the setting, and in particular the not-to-be-plucked flowers (shortly after, we learn that Holly loses her virginity to Kit at this very spot). It is not the case, then, than one character has humorously misinterpreted this place, or has missed its meaning. The pathos of the scene comes from the fact that each response seems inadequate for the



Figure 0.3 ‘The tree makes it nice’: *Badlands* (Warner Bros.)

purposes of a romantic scene. The players have become too aware of their surroundings, too self-conscious of the ways in which their story will intertwine with those surroundings.

Badlands, like *Harold and Maude* and *Mean Streets*, does not let its physical environment remain as setting or background. Love cannot be expected to blossom merely because it is set against a picturesque backdrop. Throughout New Hollywood, moments like these abound; flashpoints of uncertainty, of critique, of self-consciousness and of wonderful dramatic imagination, in which we can see the non-human world becoming a more active, and more disruptive, participant in American cinema. The following study sets out to attend to those material presences – of things and animals and people, generic icons and geographical territories, cameras and film crews – which permeate and characterize New Hollywood film.

Note

1. It is important to acknowledge the importance of Bazin’s writing to ecocritical film study; Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway describe Bazin as ‘a benchmark of sorts for thinking about cinema’s commitment to the world’ (2013: 2).
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Works Cited

Bazin, A. 1973. *Jean Renoir*, trans. W. Halsey II and W.H. Simon. New York: Simon and Schuster.

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