

Life in Movement:
A French Impressionist Critical Approach to Terrence Malick's Films

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Abstract

Terrence Malick's films from *Badlands* (1973) to *The Tree of Life* (2011) have generally received critical praise, as well as being the focus of detailed scholarly work. By contrast, his more recent films, what Robert Sinnerbrink refers to as the "Weightless trilogy" with *To the Wonder* (2012), *Knight of Cups* (2015) and *Song to Song* (2017), have been widely criticised and have been largely neglected academically. This thesis endeavours to situate the aesthetic features of these three films within a conceptual framework based in French Impressionist film theory and criticism. I will argue the ways in which these three films use natural light, gestures, close-ups, kinetic images and complex editing in relation to Germaine Dulac's notions of pure cinema and Jean Epstein's concept of *photogénie*. Moreover, these ideas can also be applied to films such as *Days of Heaven* (1978), *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *The Tree of Life*. Thus, it is my contention that despite the significant changes to his filmmaking style evident in the Weightless trilogy, he remains a highly poetic director interested in the interior lives of his characters and the rhythms of life.

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Introduction

This project stems from a longstanding interest in Terrence Malick's cinema. After the Palme d'Or winning *The Tree of Life* (2011), Malick directed a trio of contemporary films, *To the Wonder* (2012), *Knight of Cups* (2015) and *Song to Song* (2017), which film philosopher Robert Sinnerbrink refers to as the "weightless trilogy" (TMFP, 161-162). These films, which are narratively fragmented and visually dynamic, have been less well-received than Malick's previous work. Nevertheless, I have found these late Malick films to be provocative, engaging and suitable for scholarly attention. While watching *Song to Song* with colleagues we noticed that it includes a scene from the French Impressionist film *Ménilmontant* (1926). Having studied the French Impressionist film movement as an undergraduate, I began to consider the possibility of analysing Malick's later films using the work of key figures such as Germaine Dulac and Jean Epstein, especially in their respective writings on pure cinema and *photogénie*. However, as the thesis developed, it became evident that this conceptual framework can be applied across Malick's films, as I hope to demonstrate here.

The Weightless trilogy marks an interesting period in Malick's career. Jack Fisk, his longstanding production designer, said after the release of *The Tree of Life*, "I think that by completing this long-planned and personal film, Terry has passed through a gate. It has opened up the possibility of new and experimental work –his post-*Tree* career" (Hintermann and Villa, 296). For one thing, his output has increased noticeably. Apart from his twenty-year hiatus from filmmaking after *Days of Heaven* (1978), Malick has typically released films in five to seven year intervals with his debut of *Badlands* (1973) coming five years before *Days of Heaven*. *The Thin Red Line* appeared in 1998, *The New World* in 2005 and then *The Tree of Life* in 2011. However, Malick has released five feature films in the decade following *The Tree of Life*, including the Weightless trilogy, his documentary *Voyage of Time* (2016) and *A Hidden Life* (2019).

Despite this accelerated productivity, the Weightless trilogy has for the most part been poorly received, which contrasts with the reception of his previous films, which was generally positive.

The narratives of the Weightless trilogy are fragmented, even jumbled, so they demand more of viewers than his earlier films. They also include stylistic strategies more commonly associated with contemporary commercial filmmaking. Malick employs more mobile and handheld camerawork, as well as faster non-linear editing. These techniques, along with tight framings, amount to what David Bordwell calls “intensified continuity” (IC, 16-28).¹ Malick’s use of this narrative and stylistic framework have made the films more kinetic, but less cogent. In other words, his intensified narrative style has become more taxing for viewers. While this approach has largely alienated audiences, I contend that Malick’s stylistic strategies evident in the Weightless trilogy have aesthetic value that merits further critical analysis.

My primary research question will be: How can a French Impressionist conceptual framework be used to analyse Malick’s films? The French narrative avant-garde cinema of the 1920s was a key period concerning our historical and theoretical understanding of the cinematic medium. Beginning with a heightened interest in pictorialism in 1918, by 1922 France had become a fertile locale for film culture consisting of lecturers, writers, historians and filmmakers, with many indulging multiple roles (Matz, 113). The French Impressionists were a loose grouping of *cinéastes*, intellectuals and practitioners interested in the formal capabilities of film. They advocated for cinema as a distinct art form, partly in response to the increasing amount of Hollywood films screening in Europe. Jesse Matz claims: “In response, those who would become the practitioners and theorists of Impressionist cinema felt the need to develop a film aesthetic – an art that would merit its own financial support and compete with the Hollywood alternative” (Matz, 104). While there were many important figures during this time, such as René Clair, Ricciotto Canudo, Louis Delluc, Abel Gance, Dimitri Kirsanoff, Marcel L’Herbier and Léon Moussinac, this project will primarily deal with the theories and concerns of Dulac and Epstein.

French Impressionist writers and filmmakers emphasized certain visual features of cinematic imagery as aesthetically important. They connected expressive movement to actors’ gestures,

¹ I will discuss intensified continuity more in chapter two.

particular framings, kinetic movement of subjects and objects within the frame, shot relations, camerawork and the phenomena of light. As I will argue, Malick exercises similar cinematic techniques. I will draw on Dulac's concept of pure cinema and Epstein's notion of *photogénie* to address Malick's films. While both terms are potentially slippery in their respective definitions, due to Dulac and Epstein's romantic rhetoric, they can be defined briefly as follows. Pure cinema charges that only cinema specific tools and aesthetic features such as light, movement and rhythm can create pure cinema qualities, in order to impress a greater sense of emotional feeling for characters and viewers through their cinematic techniques (AOIC, 389-397). While also valued for its cinematic qualities, *photogénie* entails key moments of expressive interest that emanate from filmed characters and objects alike, which are framed in close-ups that serve as punctuations during the expressive rhythms of kinetic shot relations (OCCP, 314-318). While this thesis exercises a French Impressionist framework, it will not examine the movement's history in detail.

Within the academic perspective on Malick, many critical approaches have focused on subjects of philosophy. A philosophical approach to assessing and interpreting Malick's oeuvre is sensible, given his educational background in philosophy: he received an undergraduate degree in philosophy from Harvard, began a master's thesis on Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein at Magdalen College, Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship and translated a version of Heidegger's *The Essence of Reason*. As such, many scholars have dealt with his work in the framework of these philosophical perspectives, especially regarding Heidegger. Such noteworthy texts include Thomas Deane Tucker and Stuart Kendall's *Terrence Malick: Film and Philosophy* (2009), which contain essays on the philosophical dimensions of his filmography. Important scholars within this collection include Steven Rybin, who discusses Malick's characters as philosophers themselves who approach their own narratives through a phenomenological perspective, and Russell Manning, who takes a dialectical approach in exploring Malick's work. James Morrison and Thomas Schur's *The Films of Terrence Malick* (2003) approaches Malick from a Heideggerian perspective. Sinnerbrink's text, *Terrence Malick: Filmmaker and Philosopher* (2019), expands previous philosophical perspectives by focusing on

cinematic ethics, phenomenology, moral psychology and how Malick responds to issues of a loss of belief through the ethics of transformation. Other significant writers on the topic of philosophy in Malick's work include Stanley Cavell, Lee Carruthers, John Landreville, Martin Rossouw and Martin Woessner.

Following the release of *The Tree of Life*, there was an increase in spiritual and theological interpretations of Malick's work in light of his decided inclusion of biblical scriptures, religious allusions and themes of grace and forgiveness within the film. This is something that is also apparent throughout the Weightless trilogy and the film(s) following. Key texts on this subject include *Shining Glory: Theological Reflections on Terrence Malick's The Tree of Life* by Peter J. Leithart, and Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston's *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick*. In this text, writer Joshua Nunziato discusses *The Tree of Life* in terms of Christological meditations and mythology. Similarly, Peter M. Chandler Jr. approaches *The Tree of Life* by examining the film through biblical scriptures and allegories. Further contributing essayists include Paul Camancho, Gregory Flaxman, James Kendrick and M. Gail Hammer. While some of these writers deal with Malick's more recent films, I will only occasionally draw on commentators who adopt theological and philosophical approaches. In response to the general academic discourse involved within this range of Malick scholars, I am contending an Impressionist approach as a fresh means through which to reassess and analyse his aesthetic and stylistic strategies.

While scholarship on the Weightless trilogy is relatively light compared with Malick's other films, there are some key scholars whom I draw from in my analyses of these films. James Batcho examines Malick's episodic narrative structures and how their complicated causalities and fragmented qualities convey interior impressions of characters through cinematic techniques which function in an expressive manner (118-138). Batcho also claims that the formal features of Malick's recent films can be likened to the workings of memory (126-138). Gabriella Blasi studies Malick's modern films in terms of narrative complexity and disrupted continuity. She argues that these strategies generate an aesthetic of formal entanglement which mirrors the lives

of the characters (20-32). Moreover, the formal techniques which she analyses relate strongly to Bordwell's arguments about intensified continuity. Eliza Zocchi explores themes of grace and forgiveness in Malick's *The Tree of Life* and *Song to Song*. She contends that while *The Tree of Life* explores concepts of redemption and glory on both major and minor levels, *Song to Song* exhibits similar themes situated in more immediate human concerns (1-29).

The formal construction of the Weightless trilogy presents challenges for both viewers and scholars. The films are episodic and fragmented. I use the term montage to characterise some of the sequences in them. This requires some explanation. Malick's editing within and across sequences does not always provide or maintain either causal or spatio-temporal consistency. Rather, it attempts to create a rhythmic, emotional and/or thematic expressivity. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis, this is often reinforced by the way Malick uses voiceovers in the Weightless trilogy. Thus, montage in Malick's work functions differently from classical continuity filmmaking, which has traditionally used montages to depict the compression of narrative events over time. Nor does it resemble the practices of Soviet montage which developed logical impressions and (traditionally) socio-politically charged ideas through associative shot relations. Nonetheless, the use of the term montage is consistent with a French Impressionist approach because, as Jesse Matz notes, it was during the French Impressionist period that rhythmic montage became regarded as a distinctive aesthetic attribute of cinema (113). Malick's use of montage privileges character interiority through the arrangement of visual material. Accordingly, his approach to editing aligns with the Impressionists' interest in how cinematic movement and rhythms can create associative and personalised meanings.

Each of the chapters examines one film from the Weightless trilogy and an earlier Malick film. The purpose of this structure is to show that pure cinema and *photogénie* can be found across his oeuvre. Thus, in addition to the trilogy, I also discuss *Days of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line* and *The Tree of Life*. This approach has meant that I am not able to discuss all of Malick's work. This is largely due to space considerations. Despite this, it can be reasoned that *Badlands*, *The New World*, *Voyage of Time* and *A Hidden Life* each contain examples of pure cinema and/or

photogénie. The thesis is organised around three substantive chapters. Chapter one will introduce a French Impressionist critical perspective by focusing on Dulac's concept of pure cinema. I will discuss Germaine Dulac, as well as key commentators such as Sarah Keller and Tami Williams. From there, the chapter will engage in an analysis of Dulac's film *La Coquille et le Clergyman* (1928) and, briefly, her silent shorts *Arabesque* (1929), *Disc 957* (1928) and *Thèmes et Variations* (1928), to examine examples of pure cinema tendencies in her own filmmaking. The chapter will then consider how Malick's *Days of Heaven* can be interpreted in terms of Dulac's ideas about pure cinema. The last section deals with the complex visual style of *To the Wonder*, which I discuss in terms of light, camera movement and editing.

Chapter two will follow a similar structure to the first chapter. I will introduce Jean Epstein and provide a brief background of his role in the French Impressionist movement before exploring his concept of *photogénie*. While drawing on first-hand essays from Epstein, I focus on certain aspects of *photogénie* using the scholarship of Keller, Érik Bullot, T. Jefferson Kline, Katie Kirtland, Jesse Matz, Trond Lundemo and Christophe Wall-Romana. I then examine Epstein's film *Coeur Fidèle* (1923) and some of the ways in which he uses movement (created by cinematography, editing and phenomena within the frame), as well as close-ups, in order to develop potential photogenic moments. From this point, the chapter will move into textual analyses of Malick's *The Thin Red Line* and, in particular, *Knight of Cups*, detailing how they create opportunities for *photogénie*.

The final chapter employs this French Impressionist framework to analyse *The Tree of Life* and *Song to Song*. *The Tree of Life* is significant because of its personal importance to Malick and because it was well-received critically. It contains some notable developments in Malick's filmmaking, including narrative fragmentation, increased and complex flashbacks and abstract imagery (such as the famed creation sequence). This last section involves analysing examples of *photogénie* and pure cinema in what is Malick's most aesthetically challenging and divisive film to date, *Song to Song*.

Chapter 1: Germaine Dulac, Pure Cinema and Terrence Malick

This first chapter will introduce Germaine Dulac's theoretical ideas concerning pure cinema and endeavour to draw a thread between her aesthetic concepts and visual strategies with those of Terrence Malick. Dulac's conceptions of light, movement and rhythm as expressive features of pure cinema will be utilised here to express the rhythmic and kinetic qualities of associative-narrative imagery. These features will additionally serve as techniques for disclosing the personal expressions and experiences of Malick's characters, by functioning on an associative level. This chapter will explain a French Impressionist perspective on pure cinema using Dulac's writings. Some textual analyses of Dulac's films will be used to explore formal strategies of pure cinema within her films, before segueing into Malick's work. The chapter will examine *Days of Heaven* and *To the Wonder* in terms of aspects of pure cinema.

Dulac's conception of a pure cinema is reasonably abstract in its definition, as she writes that "The question for a pure cinema will be long and arduous" (AOIC, 397). While a considerable degree of her theoretical stance was in campaigning for cinema as a formally and aesthetically distinct art form, discussions of pure cinema also centre noticeably on formal cinematic features of (natural) light and image movement within the frame and in the shot relations between images, along with their aesthetic implications. In her essay "The Expressive Techniques of the Cinema," Dulac describes the "Seventh Art" as a cinematic medium rich in its innate, personal expressivity. She situates silently dramatic imagery and its compositional rhetoric at the forefront of cinema's aesthetic value, and further contends that purely cinematic techniques that focus on the mobile characteristics of images, which function in an expressive manner, are profitable sources of emotional impact and drama (ETC, 306-307). She writes: "The Seventh Art does not stop at the stylization of an impression as sculpture and painting do. It augments a fact by grafting a feeling onto it by means of a technique that is proper to it [...] The image, faithful guardian of a gesture or a fugitive expression, attains all of its eloquence in the silence that rules over it" (ETC, 306-307). This type of expression implies a mutable quality to the imagery, and thus, a sense of mobility that frames facial and associative expressions. In pursuit of a more authentic cinema, Dulac holds pure cinema's formal techniques of light, movement and rhythm,

as key aspects of aesthetic importance and potential. She writes: “By the choice of images, their length, and their contrasts, rhythm becomes the sole source of emotion” (ETC, 307). Here, rhythm indicates movement through editing, which is supplemented by other mobile features of light, camerawork, performance and onscreen objects. Through her theoretical perspective, Dulac strives to promote the formal qualities of the cinematic image in relation to an emotional, even affectionate response within its subjects.

While much of pure cinema denotes its exclusion from other art forms, such as theatre and literature, the term came to indicate more abstract, avant-garde films in the late 1920s, including Dulac’s work. Pure cinema has generally been described as purely abstract and devoid of characters entirely, showcasing only expressive movement of objects, light and other phenomena (Horak, 4-7). Moreover, while Dulac assumes this more restrictive approach in some of her experimental films at the end of the 1920s, the general ethos of describing pure cinema as a visual articulation of active personal experience remains at the core of its theoretical implications. As we will explore below, Dulac’s work in the late 1920s comprised avant-garde, pure cinema films, both including and excluding character subjects. She writes: “We can use the term ‘avant-garde’ for any film whose technique employed with a view to renewed expressiveness of image and sound breaks with established traditions to search out [...] new emotional chords” (AGC, 43). Dulac utilised formal visual techniques of pure cinema through which to convey an emotional expressivity for her subjects, by relating the energetic quality of movement in the imagery to an underlying emotional quality within the characters. Dulac reiterates cinema as a silent art, syntactical in its structure, as well as certain artistic visual techniques available to it, such as distortions, shot variations, differing angles, dissolves and superimpositions (ETC, 306-307). While some pure cinema films admittedly delve into pure abstraction and experimental strategies that preclude the involvement of characters themselves there, nevertheless, remains a steadfast interest of subjectivity and emotionality at the core of its theory, revealed through quality imagery.

For Dulac, the implications of an aesthetic poeticism through the associative arrangements of images in Impressionist cinema was pertinent to the medium's drive for "poetic possibilities" (ARR, 141). Sarah Keller notes how Dulac's rhetorical assertion that "cinema is poetry" is a useful analogy between otherwise distinct art mediums (Dulac qtd. in ARR, 141). Keller adds that "The way in which she argues cinema ought to be metaphorized as poetry highlights cinema's rhythms" (ARR, 141). Perceiving cinema as a poetic medium helps to position its status as a creative art medium. Keller further offers: "Dulac uses the poetic analogy in order to direct attention to the potentiality of cinema's techniques as expressive tools" (ARR, 141). As a progenitor of an expressive, poeticized cinematic potential, rhythmic imagery was perceived as fruitful in its inherent abstractions. This approach ventures to entertain more creative liberties and reveal nuanced artistic discoveries unavailable to the requisite logic and accessibility of a traditional narrative framework. Much of this expressivity deals with conditions of cinematic movement in the imagery.

Dulac's emphasis on image mobility composes a few different cinematic features and techniques. She discusses technical aspects of cinematic movement in consideration with the movement of an inner life of personal expression and experience (ETC, 308-310). Within the image frame, one can see movement through performances and objects, such as a character running through a field or a machine whirling in the background. In addition, by focusing on facial gestures, this performative movement further indicates a sense of emotional movement through physical expressions. Camerawork also exhibits key movement through its mechanical techniques, whereas the fleeting conditions of natural light entail an inherent kinetic quality in its transience, especially at dusk. Editing also generates rhythms by juxtaposing images which already contain expressive and mobile features. Dulac adds: "From juxtaposition, rhythm was born" (AOIC, 393). Furthermore, she asserts that "The study of composition, moreover, when applied to the arrangement of images, created astonishing expressive rhythms that were likened to movement" (AOIC, 392). Together, these aspects of movement generate an associative quality that frames techniques of pure cinema.

Dulac focuses on kinetic imagery through pure cinema in order to highlight its innate expressivity and aesthetic value. She writes that instead of an appreciation of aesthetic imagery being secondary to the plot, silent visual images should be foregrounded within film narratives and regarded with acute artistic importance (VAF, 34). Thus, pure cinematic features of mobility in light, camerawork and editing all collectively create emotionally provocative movements and rhythms that become formal techniques for illustrating a film's aesthetic content, centred on what she describes as life (AGC, 43-48). A rhetorical image language is thus suitable in outlining her yearning for an artistic cinema that operates by focusing on gestural images and their rhythmic arrangements through editing. Dulac evinces the aesthetic value of cinematic imagery, rendered through kinetic techniques. This implies both a cumulative effect on the viewer and physiognomic expressions of characters' interior feelings, conveyed through the vitality of image movement. Furthermore, image movement entails busy frames or onscreen phenomena and performance gestures leavened by camerawork and editing. The transient quality of light often frames such phenomena and is a key feature of movement as well.

Dulac's rhetorical perspective on light, as an essence of pure cinema, fortifies her claims for cinema as a novel art form with its own unique and mobile techniques. She writes: "For cinema, which is moving, changing, interrelated light, nothing but light, genuine and restless light can be its true setting [sic]" (EC, 39). Therefore, light is utilised as a pure cinema technique through both its dramatic cinematic quality and its phenomenological movement. This quality is best distilled through formal techniques involving the movement between juxtaposed images and the movement of phenomena within the frame, including (and especially) light. As an attribute of pure cinema, Dulac also indicates light as a meaningful reflection of a character's personal feelings (AOIC, 394). In addition to light as a technique that is distinctive to pure cinema, Dulac also formulates aspects of artistic mobility in terms of rhythms in editing and the movement of camerawork, which "provokes and accentuates an impression" (ETC, 309). Here, she is highlighting impressions of objects and characters within the image, as well as the nature of the image itself. Further below, we will unpack camera movement and rhythmic editing more by analysing Dulac's films.

As a key concept in Impressionist discourse, pure cinema leans into its formal strategies of visual associations, expressive movement via montage and aggregate visual language to disclose its principal aesthetics of subconscious and subjective interest (Horak, 6). While there is a degree of latitude in the exact qualifications and parameters of pure cinema, the concept is innately rooted in its motivated charge of cinematic singularity, rhythmic expressivity and aesthetic potential. Between her more character-driven films such as *La Coquille et le Clergyman* [The Seashell and the Clergyman] (1928) and the abstract and subjectless *Arabesque* (1929), Dulac explores the visual implications of light, movement and montage through which to frame patterned expressions of subjects and objects alike. In her seminal essay “Aesthetics, Obstacles, Integral *Cinégraphie*” Dulac offers her general perspective on Impressionist theory:

Impressionism regarded nature and objects as elements equal in importance to action. A light, a shadow, or a flower at first were meaningful reflections of a (character’s) feeling or of a situation; then, little by little, their own intrinsic value made them become necessary complements (to the action) [...] Later, rhythm, mechanical movement, long suppressed by the literary and dramatic framework, disclosed its will to exist. (394).

Here, Dulac describes pure cinema techniques of light, image movement and their subsequent rhythmic qualities as cinematic components of artistic imagery.

Given these discussions, cinema can serve as a derivative surrogate for the adaptive material of disparate art mediums, or it can instead flourish in its own artistic qualities as a distinguished art form. Dulac’s interest in pressing cinema to utilise its novel techniques of rhythmic editing, gestural framings and dramatic imagery through collective mobility and lighting was to honour the particularities of the medium and avoid the inheritance of unrelated art forms. As a theorist, Dulac was a potent and radical voice among the French Impressionists in her advocating for thematically focused, psychological inflections through image movement and suggestive qualities of the cinema (AOIC, 398-398). For her, the camera was not merely a recording device of profilmic movement, but was, moreover, a creative instrument for disclosing the subjectively “real” through its rhythmic image compositions. Dulac asserts “expressive movement as the generator of emotion logically leads to (the idea of) a pure cinema” (AOIC, 395). As such, expressively-charged image movement, including that of light, can exteriorize character

emotions, while also stimulating an emotional response from the audience. She adds that cinema is “pure movement or abstract expressions, purely visual, whether lyrical, poetic, psychological,” where an experiential correspondence between feelings and the formal rhythms of the imagery register an underlying, interior drama within the characters (Dulac qtd. in OH, 164).

Dulac's Films

Dulac's views on the value of interiority, revealed through expressive image-driven techniques and its rhythmic properties, are apparent in *La Coquille et le Clergyman*. Zachariah Rush profiles the abstract, symbolist content which composes the film:

The entire film plays out like a kaleidoscope of sensuous and unconscious symbolism as one strange scene follows another with no discernible narrative structure. Rather than utilise a linear narrative *The Seashell and the Clergyman* presents states of mind, preoccupations, thoughts, and imaginings that express the unconscious impulses that are the motive force behind those actions considered rational, deliberate or lucid (124).

In his critique of the film, Rush highlights its fabric of disassembled narrative logic and an array of sensations through the rhythms of the film's impulsive visual mode as primary narrative devices. These non-commercial features exhibit key aspects of an aesthetic interest in interior character emotions through complex, flamboyant and ambiguous imagery. The visual-narrative quality of the film creates associations through the rhythms of editing, relaying a dramatic, cumulative image movement. These aesthetic qualities show how the precepts of pure cinema are embedded in kinetic imagery, which is both expressive towards the audience and visually exteriorizes the complicated emotions of its characters.

Jesse Matz points out rhythmic editing as a key device of the Impressionist style and how this editing practice conveys subjective imagery as memories, fantasies, thoughts or feelings through its capacities in speed and alternation (109). For the Impressionists, the use of montage editing was less about an intellectual interest (i.e. Soviet montage theory), than it was a concern for the subjective, emotional insights of the characters. Rather than stimulating a reactive, psychological message through montage (as is evident in Soviet montage theory), the Impressionists were more

concerned with the aesthetic ambiguities and emotional implications of how images can function expressively. This relates to both the feelings of the characters and the reactions of the audience. Within this strategy of using cinematic mobility to create sensations and suggestions of character interiority, explicit plot narration is generally secondary to the associative quality of imagery. This sense of expressive montage is apparent in *La Coquille et le Clergyman*, which is structured around the hallucinatory logic of a salacious Priest (Alex Allin). The narrative is suffused with frenetic non-linear imagery, imparting the enraged, sexually violent mental state of its title character. The flurried visual images illustrate his murderous intentions towards the General (Lucien Bataille) and a hostile sexual interest in his wife (Genica Athanasiou), whom the Priest chases for a generous portion of the film. The story is structured around abstract image relations, instead of the narrative logic and cogency of a mainstream cinematic framework. The image patterns within Dulac's film are kinetic, fast and complex, articulating the problematic and confronting licentiousness of its main character. According to Matz, rhythmic montage had also become one of the primary methods of disclosing a distinctive cinematic aesthetic among the Impressionists after 1923 (113).

The visual dynamics of the film's imagery are also conveyed via its camerawork and these image movements supplement Dulac's "movement of feelings" through juxtapositions, divisions and rhythms of the imagery in editing (AOIC, 302). For example, the opening sequence begins with the camera tilting vertically before tracking down a shadowed hallway. The initial motion of the camera escalates alongside the brisk editing movement as the film shows various fades and cuts of the Priest pouring a mysterious concoction from the bowl of a large seashell into a seemingly inexhaustible supply of elongated flasks. He repeatedly refills and casts the glassware downward into a growing mound of shining debris, as the General spies on him through the doorway. After a brief slow-motion scene of the General striding across the room the montage resumes with a series of fades and jump cuts revealing the General floating throughout various spaces in the room, as the Priest continues his obsessive activity. The General then snatches the seashell from the Priest and circles the room in another slow-motion passage. This strange sequence comes to its climax when the General strikes the seashell with his sword, signalling a succession of distorted, non-causal imagery, including blurred images of the two men, broken glassware and

the curved sword reflecting glints of light. This episode of abstract, energetic images details little in terms of plot and motivations for the characters' actions. However, it does present a collage of associative imagery through intensified montage, camera movement and even the flaring motions of reflected light, which collectively parallel the anxious and obsessive mental state of the Priest. While the opening is the most kinetic sequence of the film Dulac shows creative instances of movement throughout the film, such as the dancehall sequence, which exhibits busy frames with dancers performing, tracking camerawork, rhythmic editing and a gyrating chandelier in the background. Moreover, Dulac's expressive visual effects of superimpositions, dissolves and distortion are evident throughout the entirety of the film. These visual activities thus provide an associational perspective of the Priest's unhinged emotional interiority through poetic, pure cinema techniques.

Dulac also felt that the poetic and rhythmic effects of images had more of an expressive capacity than that of the explicit verbal language evident in most commercial cinema (Williams, 142-143; 153-154). For instance, in the peculiar associative images strewn throughout *La Coquille et le Clergyman*, one can sense the Priest's crazed impulses towards sex and violence. While quite obscure, the film illustrates these interior qualities of the Priest more effectively through its poetic and gestural imagery rather than through dialogue. The notion of gesture here refers to both the silent physiognomy of the onscreen subjects and the aesthetic quality of the images themselves. A poetic quality in pure cinema also indicates non-causal, abstract and associative narrative modes. Dulac leans into the abstract characteristics of these modes in order to highlight pure cinema techniques and distinct cinematic methods.

It appears that the closest Dulac came to fully fleshing out her purely non-narrative, abstract preferences came in 1928 and 1929, with the elliptically structured, silent shorts: *Disc 957* (1928), *Thèmes et Variations* (1928) and *Arabesque* (LMC, 122). Within this trio of works, Dulac was able to indulge in her formal experimentations with natural light, kinetic editing strategies and rhythmic image associations, free from both speech and performer. These abstract films eschewed plot entirely, maximizing properties of light and movement as integral, pure tools of cinema, both conceptually and formally. All these films are further patterned by visual

montage. In *Arabesque*, Dulac composes a succession of nondescript images that exhibit sunlight reflected in natural settings. There are numerous images which also show light streaming through treetops and bouncing off shallow puddles and water fountains, emphasizing the flickering motions of light in purely natural settings. Light is also used expressively in *Disque 957* where it is seen accentuating raindrops that are streaming down windowpanes or reflecting off a spinning record. On behalf of *Thèmes et Variations*, Tami Williams writes: “Through this elaborate schema, the image of the dance leaves the domain of the photographic and attains abstraction, according to Dulac, ‘to create, through the rhythm that it espouses, a suggestive aspect that goes beyond form’” (154). While briefly touching on Dulac’s abstract shorts, we can acknowledge that while she did work gingerly in commercial and documentary genres, her primary interests were situated in the poetic modes of pure cinema, outside the prosaic precedents of conventional narratives.

Dulac and Malick

Dulac’s associative approach to formulating pure cinema in her films parallels the way Malick also foregrounds poetic qualities of light, kinetic imagery and the rhythmic effects of montage. For example, Malick’s *Days of Heaven* is set to rhythmically arranged sequences of the early twentieth-century American frontier, which exist in “intervals, or interludes, between relatively disassociated patches of story” (Morrison and Schur, 48). The image-centric nature of Malick’s elliptical narrative acts as a corollary to character interiority, relying on facial gestures and the transient, ephemeral quality of the imagery as an associative lens into the subjects’ feelings. This use of visual movement as a revealing agent of subjective interest is crucial concerning the theories of the Impressionists and issues of movement through light, camerawork, editing, performance and phenomena (Williams, 106). Malick’s films employ aesthetic strategies which approximate the emphasis Dulac places on light, movement and rhythm as tools of pure cinema and these styles “convey[s] thoughts and feelings inarticulate in the logic of narrative” (Williams, 36). Through such strategies, Dulac and Malick both convey artistic expressions via rhythms and montage, which “possess their own, revelatory logic” (OH, 166). These qualities are apparent in *Days of Heaven* as the film uses pure cinema techniques to create a more non-causal, poetic narrative. For Malick, Dulac and the Impressionists, light and mobility are specifically

important in how they operate as aesthetic functions beyond mere technology. Moreover, Dulac often affirmed cinema as a nexus of movement, interior and exterior life (Williams, 121-122). Therefore, Malick's visual methods and aesthetic strategies can be read in terms of pure cinema, as the concept of cinematic movement attributes to personal expression and interiority.

A Pure Cinema Perspective in *Days of Heaven*

While Malick displays a noticeable preference for fleeting imagery, emotionally ambiguous characters and art cinema narration, his films possess gestural qualities that recall silent cinema. Much of this is marshalled by his peripheral use of dialogue, privileging of a visual framework and issues of movement through natural lighting, roaming cinematography and rhythmic editing strategies, which favour more art cinema modes. James Morrison and Thomas Schur contend that:

Malick's films look back to the silent cinema as a source of inspiration. A key stylistic procedure of *Days of Heaven*, to alternate slow, sweeping shots with still, sudden closeups from a low-angle, has clearly been inspired by Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1929)² [...] Malick's principles of visual construction and his de-emphases on dialogue [acts] as a spur or driving force to narrative [sic] (80).

While Morrison and Schur note certain visual cues shared by Malick and Dovzhenko's formative Ukrainian silent film, the key principles in this excerpt lie in Malick's artistic formal strategies. Along with the Impressionists, Malick highlights the ephemeral qualities of natural light, expressive editing patterns and camera movements to create rhythmic visual associations. These illustrate emotional sensations in the lives of his characters.

Pure cinema tendencies of employing a distinctive visual language, in lieu of comprehensive narrative structures, typifies *Days of Heaven*. Often, Malick will avoid onscreen exposition and cut to moments *in media res*, giving the story an episodic, transient structure. Within this narrative organization, Malick reveals momentary emotional qualities of his characters, through

² More on Alexander Dovzhenko's *Earth* in chapter three.

splintered moments in the plot and a patchwork of impressionistic imagery. The editing montages in the film create a narrative flux, which provides an aesthetic thread concerning the passage of time in the lives of the characters, who are otherwise verbally reticent. This recalls Dulac's charge that "cinema is a silent art. Silent expression is its categorical rule" (Dulac qtd. in OH, 159). These traits of silence are ideas for Malick, introducing a taciturn, visual mode which will define his later films to an even greater degree. In the absence of speech, his characters are typically ciphers, psychologically obscure and self-searching. Such subjective ambiguities will define the enigmatic characterisations of the majority of his subjects going forward in his career.

As an early entry in his career, *Days of Heaven* features many hallmarks of Malick's developing style. Visual expressivity through montage is foregrounded in place of dialogue, and throughout the film, conversations are almost entirely replaced with hushed or wordless exchanges. In *Days of Heaven*, the plot is largely "displaced to the margins," as a stream of traditionally non-linear scenes (often bathed in crepuscular light) create a more associative narrative structure (Morrison and Schur, 34). In terms of plot, *Days of Heaven* follows the couple Bill (Richard Gere) and Abby (Brooke Adams) as they flee Chicago with Bill's younger sibling Linda (Linda Manz) in 1916 to the Texas Panhandle to work as seasonal wheat harvesters for a reserved, ailing Farmer (Sam Shepard). After learning of the Farmer's terminal illness, Bill devises a plan to pose as Abby's brother, so that she can marry the Farmer and inherit his wealth upon his death. Linda explains via voiceover that sibling fabrication was initially a means to avoid gossip from the other workers and hide their inner lives. Issues of love, jealousy, evasion, transience and death are present throughout the film, though Malick forgoes the framework of a conventional drama by emptying the film of traditional conversational information and allowing the dynamic quality of imagery to function as its own narrative language system. By deviating from the linear prose present in most commercial filmmaking strategies, Malick allows for more realized poetic forms like that of the Impressionists (Wall-Romana, 51). Dulac adds cinema can be conceived as "the visual poem made up of human life-instincts," and Malick forgoes the prosaic concerns of conventional narration for a visual, poetic quality (AGC, 46). The actors' taciturn performances often overshadow their dialogue, which is eschewed to accentuate gestures and preambles of facial expressivity. Even Bill's accidental murder of the factory foreman, which sparks the

characters' journey to the idyllic frontier, is conveyed primarily through arrested expressions, gestures to violence and a quick succession of brisk action. In this opening scene, the dramatic argument is mostly drowned out by the explosive din of the factory. This approach to indicating dramatic information through montage, further reveals Malick's encouragement of visual rhythms between shots, valued in their momentary onscreen presence.

According to David Bordwell, classical narratives are oriented by a clear and discernible linkage of cause-effect events, whereas the art film has an evident loosening of the narrative that demands of the audience new strategies for reading the film (ACMFP, 56-57). Moreover, the mode of art cinema is a distinct branch of the medium situated somewhere between the cogent, commercial narrative methods and the non-narrative, wholesale experimental style of the avant-garde. In *Days of Heaven*, Malick showcases art cinema attributes such as uncertain psychological motivation and a deflated concern for causal action by privileging non-linear narrative patterns which instigate new strategies for disclosing character subjectivity (ACMFP, 57-62). An innate expressivity in "images and feelings and moments" valued by Dulac, echoes in Malick's style as he also favours associative logic over causal clarity (Williams, 15). Malick organizes his film around character ambiguities and loosely connected, elliptical sequences to inspire his audience to reflect upon the visual and thematic transience of the film. This quality is composed through the film's ephemeral narrative framework, fleeting lighting conditions and the transient nature of its characters, who are eclipsed by the surrounding natural world. Like Dulac's *Arabesque*, *Days of Heaven* also focuses on the aggregate sensations of movement through its attention to natural rhythms of movement, such as the wind rustling through neighbouring flora or upward angles of sunlight passing through clouds and treetops. Dulac and Malick both utilise aesthetic strategies that highlight cinematic dynamism via movement in the frame, camerawork and editing to articulate an abstract sense of emotional movement. Dulac once described integral cinema as "a visual symphony made of rhythmic images" (qtd. in OH, 159). Here in Malick's filmmaking, we find an associative quality of imagery that correlates to character feeling and kindred impressionistic strategies which position his aesthetics closer to that of the concepts and theories involved in French Impressionism.

Martin likens *Days of Heaven* to an avant-garde poem. He writes: “Wordless (but never soundless) scenes flared up and were snatched away before the mind could fully grasp their plot import; what we could not see did not always seem matched to what we hear.” Here Martin relays the poetic qualities of the film, addressing how silence and movement between scenes frame the underlying dramatic currents of the film, while avoiding the more expositional and accessible narrative strategies of commercial cinema. The conceits of traditional plot structures are substituted in *Days of Heaven* for episodic sequences which reveal traces of concrete narrative information. Thus, the audience must rely on impressions of non-causal imagery and suggestive information to comprehend the story. Dulac contends: “by virtue of its visual form [...] the composition of the image is our rhetoric; the contrasts and the sequences that it sets up are our means of silently affecting [spectators]” (ETC, 306-307). The clarity in causal relations and character psychology is subsidiary to the visual rhetoric of the film, along with its more abstract themes of transience, death and rhythmic relations with the natural world. Martin adds that “the mise-en-scène of *Days of Heaven* aims less at fluid continuity between images or gestures –indeed, it is a remarkably elliptical film.” Instead, Malick’s episodic narrative is framed by the overall transient quality of his images.

This sense of transience is evident in the opening section of the film, as the trio make a brisk escape from Chicago, riding on top of railway carriages towards their new prairie home. Manz’s voiceover provides some information for their plans and actions, but this equally floats around her own peculiar passing thoughts and ideas, which are situated alongside a stream-of-consciousness flow of imagery. The montage train voyage provides a poetic and rhythmic visual impetus to the narrative which eases into a final longer scene of the harvest caravan passing through the wooden archway and onto the farm. This highlights the natural ease of escapism that this environment initially provides. The non-linear, poetic structure of this film is supported by impressions and sensations generated by its expressive, pastoral imagery. Dulac further links this mode of emotionally charged, poetic imagery with feelings and sensations (AOIC, 393-394). These features of *Days of Heaven* create a mood associated with the imagery that uses pure cinema techniques to indicate emotional states of the characters, while also situating an episodic narrative framework that complements the general transience of the images.

The languid pacing of the editing parallels the flow of the natural surroundings and the characters' lives. This associative logic of *Days of Heaven* generates an experiential narrative, wherein the rhythmic interludes of the film situate the subjects in a way that they can step away from past consequence and relish in their idyllic settings. Malick uses visual expressivity through these cinematic tools of light, movement and rhythms in the images, to create sensations and feelings for the spectator, just as Dulac affirms in her own writings (VAF, 33-35). In the scenes that compose the middle passages of *Days of Heaven*, we experience relaxed montage sequences with a frequent magic hour backdrop (more on the magic hour below). This provokes feelings involved in the passing of time in one's life. These montages include scenes of wind-swept pastures, relaxed sunset strolls, close-ups of wheat grain, signallers waving flags at the edge of the horizon, scarecrows silhouetted against a red band of sunlight that illuminates the overhead clouds and an evening prayer service. While the consistency of magic hour settings provides a visual thread between disparate points in the story and a visual framework that registers a gentle flow within the montages, one is left wondering the true passing of time and events in the lives of the characters. The features of transient light and natural imagery further supplement our understanding of Malick's work in relation to pure cinema, as he uses the rhythmic expressivity of the image to denote expressions within the characters. This is in correlation to Dulac's notion of a "purely visual emotion" through issues of editing and movement in cinema (AOIC, 396).

Dulac asserts: "The image alone is king. The work therefore affects you through a purely cinematic technique, of contrasts and parallelisms [of images]" (ETC, 306-307). Similarly in *Days of Heaven*, Malick facilitates pure cinematic techniques of demonstrative light and movement that exist within the frames and define each passing scene. He conceives his story from an associative perspective, where "the film's style conveys thoughts and feeling inarticulable in the logic of narrative" (Morrison and Schur, 36). The kinetic quality of the imagery thus arouses an emotional awareness concerning its subjects, even when they are distant silhouettes eclipsed at dusk or a passing figure in a montage sequence. The film's sequential rhythms provide sensations that indicate the inner worlds of Malick's characters. *Days of Heaven* uses these pure cinema techniques involving the movement of natural light, camerawork and

editing to disclose characters' feelings, which shift between states of love, serenity, jealousy and anxiety. Furthermore, Dulac affirms that visual quality of rhythm through editing could express character emotions in ways more profitable than conventional plot narration (Williams, 142143).

By employing similar conceptual strategies to Dulac, Malick utilises light and movement to generate suggestions and performance gestures as a window into the feelings and potential motivations of the characters, although these personal aspects are often ambiguous. These gestures are often framed as facial expressions situated outside of explicit dramatic incidents. As Dulac argues, a pure cinema film "must draw its active and emotive principle from images formed of unique visual tones" (VAF, 33). Thus, Dulac charges that pure cinema techniques yield emotions and impressions, and this perspective can be found in Malick strategies. Malick's elliptical narrative approach is evident in the middle section of the film, once Bill, Abby and Linda are welcomed to share in the Farmer's luxurious lifestyle. What follows at this point in the story is a prolonged, episodic string of moments which present the characters romping and indulging in the leisure of the offseason. Many of these vignettes show the impromptu family walking through the woods, splashing in the river, lunching in a gazebo and relishing their freedom from work. In these moments of play, partial bits of plot detail and interludes of evening vistas (paired with the audio of Ennio Morricone's score and Manz's reflections) are stitched together in loose narrative patterns. Most of the film is a woven patchwork of incidents and moments, which disclose subjective insights of the characters through their gestures and activities, rather than through dialogue, such as when the Farmer and Abby bond quietly in mutual company [Figure 1].

The general montage techniques of the film are connected by familiar visual landscapes, mostly lit by the transitory light of the magic hour. Consequently, when the narrative jumps between moments, such as Bill walking alone at dusk, the Farmer and Abby lounging at twilight and the harvesters leaving the fields after a day's work, there is a flowing visual pattern to the transient story details. As Dulac values the aesthetics of light as meaningful reflections of character conditions and feelings, so does Malick use light to visually express transience within the characters' experiences (AOIC, 394) David Davies further accounts for the parallel of visual phenomena and character subjectivity of *Days of Heaven* by stating that the landscape not only

eclipses the unfolding human drama, reducing its importance, but it also echoes the emotional states of the characters (273). Thus, we can argue that the rhythms of the environment are reflective and indicative of the characters' emotions, as the frequent fading light and passing imagery mirrors the fugacious moments of their lives.



Fig 1. The Farmer (Sam Shepard) and Abby (Brooke Adams) in the quiet moments of the magic hour.

While Dulac's emphasis on light as a pure cinema technique is generally predicated on its cinema-specific essence and as an aesthetic of pure cinema, both Malick and Dulac use light to create dramatic expressions, uninhibited by prosaic dramaturgy. Dulac discussed cinematic movement and its suggestive rhythms as attached to an emotional feeling, and in *Days of Heaven*, Malick foregrounds the natural quality of light to highlight the emotional transience of his characters (AGC, 46-47). Malick and his cinematographers profited on natural light in creative ways that were not only aesthetically appealing but also implied a temporal movement through its inherent, ephemeral conditions during the evening hours. The cinematography in *Days of Heaven* makes inventive use of the magic hour: the period of luminosity, nestled

between sunset and nightfall, lasting about twenty minutes.³ This diffuse and soft evening lighting is aesthetically ideal for capturing dramatic light; yet it also provides an important thematic and narrative function of visually expressing the elliptical passing of time. As Haskell Wexler said of the magic hour: “The most beautiful light is the light that’s transitory, the light of sunsets or sunrise [sic]” (Hintermann and Villa, 129).⁴ As pure cinema techniques of cinematic energetic imagery and light are used to augment the visual-narrative, the use of light is especially noteworthy in *Days of Heaven*. Malick and cinematographers Néstor Almendros and Wexler depended on the magic hour extensively during their shoot, and this lighting is used so frequently that it becomes a visual emblem in the film. The sum of aesthetic movement in *Days of Heaven* through lighting and montage creates a quality of expressive imagery that illustrates a general mood of emotional transience.

This sense of mood comes across, primarily, through Malick’s episodic narration and editing strategies, which underscore this notion of emotions having a correlation to movement. Dulac asserts that: “By the choice of images, their length, and their contrasts, rhythm becomes the sole source of emotion” (ETC, 306-307). This is evident in the sequences after Bill leaves with the circus aviators and we see the Farmer, Abby and Linda in a montage. The sequence plays without speech as images of lush tree branches sway in the wind, the trio play in the snow, a lone tractor tills the soil, the new couple embraces warmly in bed and the Farmer bird-watches with an elated smile. While these characters do not express their interior feelings in an expositional manner, the image sequencing, along with their dramatic countenances, underscores their collective happiness in the passing rhythms of the seasons. The editing further leavens an emotional cadence which Dulac relates to pure cinema (AOIC, 394-395).

The pure cinematic techniques of Malick, Almendros and Wexler highlight the kinetic quality of light in the magic hour backdrop that suffuses *Days of Heaven*, but there is another method of mobility in its cinematography. Dynamic qualities of light and cinematography supplement pure

³ The shooting location in Alberta, Canada granted longer magic hour periods (See Bailey).

⁴ Hereafter referred to as HV.

cinematic movement as Dulac offers that “The image can be as complex as an orchestration since it may be composed of combined movements of expression and light” (VAF, 35). While using light as an expressively creative technique, *Days of Heaven* exhibits tracking camerawork, which will become increasingly energetic in his later films with cinematographers John Toll and Emmanuel Lubezki. Almendros and Wexler incorporate more liberated tracking movement within their collective shooting for the film. On a practical level, this was beneficial for capturing the ephemeral evening lighting conditions, as well as Malick’s noteworthy improvisational method of shooting. *Days of Heaven* was also one of the early American films to use Panavision’s Panaglide prototype of the Steadicam, allowing for the camera to be a roving, searching and highly mobile instrument of its own right, much to Malick’s enthusiasm (HV, 136). There is a notable moment in the film when Abby and Bill are wading in the river, as the camera encircles them. While showcasing tracking movement, this instance also points to the movement of performance, as the actors appear to be generally moving in circles, rather than straight lines, and wandering through natural spaces (Chion, 49). Other instances of this performative movement are seen when the characters swim by the riverbank; during the sequence after Bill leaves the farm to join to the circus; when the girls dance around one another as they play with fireworks; or in the many evening strolls which the characters enjoy.

As a sovereign instrument, Malick’s camera allows for the film to explore new narrative dimensions through sensations generated by dynamic mobility. It is worth noting that while *Days of Heaven* has more complex cinematography than in Malick’s previous film *Badlands*, the camera movement here is mostly subtle and relaxed. This evokes the tranquillity of daily living which composes most of the film. The cinematography often draws attention to moments of respite, with interludes of fauna at play or a sea of wheat stirring in the breeze. The idyll of this natural space is a haven for the characters to indulge and fall sway to. Malick’s editing style, while episodic, has a languid quality that mirrors these gentle rhythms of daily life and the main interludes which compose the middle section of the film are measured, yet transient. Moreover, the formally expressive camera movement of *Days of Heaven* is evident in his films going forward and further compliments the emotional ambiguities that typify many of his characters throughout his filmography.

Malick's visual techniques articulate pure cinema expressions as Dulac attests: "Pure cinema did not reject sensitivity or drama, but it tried to attain them through purely visual means" (AGC, 47). Here Malick's visual rhythms of life in *Days of Heaven* approximate Dulac's notions of pure cinema with image movement through editing that provides a quality of feeling, as the relaxed flow of montage mirrors the relaxed lifestyle which the characters relish. She writes how pure cinema is "one liberated from every property alien to it, a cinema (that is) the art of movement and of the visual rhythms of life and the imagination" (AOIC, 396). Therefore, conditions of movement inform the techniques of pure cinema as they produce visual mobility through cinematic distinctions of light, movement and rhythm. The notion of transient light also harkens back to the Impressionist painters, as Malick's *en plein air* method of shooting echoes the working techniques of the Impressionist painters. This shooting method further teases notions of *photogénie*, which is also predicated on the aesthetics of filmed light and its movement (Wall-Romana, 29). Issues of natural light also entail its own quality of fleeting movement, attributable to definitions of *photogénie* (GPEN).⁵

Dulac argues that different emotional modes of dramaturgy can be illustrated by altering image movement through rhythm, and this can be seen in the latter half of *Days of Heaven* (AGC, 47). While Bill, Abby and Linda enjoy the idyllic world provided by the Farmer, a simmering human drama inevitably disrupts the idle play in their days of heaven. The languid pacing of imagery which typified the characters' relaxed attitudes begins to change, as the Farmer slowly becomes wise to their ruse. Soon emotions of frustration and indignance supplant the frivolity of their pastoral living conditions and Malick alters his pure cinema techniques to denote these changes in mood. The placid rhythms of previous sequences are replaced by noticeably faster and more kinetic compositions, camerawork and cutting as the Farmer's realisation of their deceit comes to light. A key instance of this occurs during the ominous fire sequence of the film. In response to the insidious locusts, which have recently plagued the farm, the Farmer has his workers frantically collect baskets full of the insects and cast them into a large bonfire. As the night-time

⁵ n.p.

scene ensues, the camera encircles the bonfire via Panaglide, as a swarm of workers appear from various angles, making a mad dash at casting their loads into the fire. The mobility of the camera, the performers and even the moving light of the flames generate an increasing tension, distinct from the rest of the film. This heightened sensation leads to emotional eruption, as the enraged Farmer lashes out at Bill, revealing his awareness of their scheme, and inadvertently setting fire to the wheat fields. The remainder of the sequence plays out in various momentous cuts of labourers attempting to tamp out the flames of this new hellish, landscape. This frightening landscape also presents a noticeable contrast to the heavenly atmosphere of the prior sequences. As evidenced here, Malick creates associations between juxtaposed images, to register externalised emotional environments and an immersive subjective experience of his characters, who have fallen from their heavenly state into one of exposure and destruction (Yates, 3-8). Moreover, this inflamed imagery details Dulac's impressions about altering editing movements, where slow to rapid rhythms can signify different dramatic states (AOIC, 396).

Without exposition or dialogue, Malick allows this tension, instigated through kinetic imagery, to show the Farmer's growing understanding of Bill and Abby's deception. The fire sequence is connected to an earlier scene, where the Farmer spies from his rooftop terrace down on Bill and Abby as they share a kiss, "misinterpreting" their farewell gesture (Rijsdijk, 143). As the Farmer gazes down at the couple an anemometer spins fiercely in front of him. The rhythmic intensity of this device parallels his internal affront and feelings of betrayal, as previous suspicions of their affair culminate in this present awareness of their scheme. The gyrating and circling motions of the cumulative cinematography, editing and objects in these scenes also foreshadow anxieties felt in Epstein's *Coeur Fidèle* (which will feature in the following chapter). In the scene following the fire episode, the Farmer follows Abby into the belvedere to accost her. Their confrontation is limited to flared eyes and tears as they circle one another. Words fall short in this scene, although Shepard does finally cry out: "You're a liar!" The intensified movement through pure cinema techniques in these sequences differ from the more relaxed mood of the rest of the film. Instead, Malick escalates his dynamic strategies to articulate his characters' emotional agitations, just as Dulac does in her case study film. Between Dulac and Malick's respective films, their imagery and compositions carry emotional implications through its visual suggestions and gestures. As

such, they each evidently demonstrate pure cinema tendencies through kinetic imagery, light and phenomena.

Both *La Coquille et le Clergyman* and *Days of Heaven* share similar aesthetic strategies involving complicated narrative designs and kinetic imagery. These formal qualities of imagery functioning in an expressive manner provide a dynamic quality of psycho-graphic landscapes, in which the characters' environments and the films' stylized cinematography and editing echo the interior states of the characters involved. Dulac claims that cinematic movement provides perception for thoughts, feelings and sensations for characters (AGC, 45). In these films, traditional editing patterns determined by contiguous imagery and spatial continuity are replaced with narrative ellipses. The resulting image patterns thereby foreground visual associations between shots, while also indulging in the sensorial effects of dynamic camera movement (Morrison and Schur, 123). The prospect of an image-driven system of narration in *Days of Heaven* provides much interior information concerning the characters. In spite of Manz's voiceovers, the film plays out much as a silent film might, by focusing on image-centric elements of light, movement and editing rhythms to convey the underlying emotions of the characters. Meaghan Morris has even suggested that Malick's film is "in constant motion, and indeed about movement in all its forms: human, natural, mechanical" (qtd. in Martin). As mentioned above, the restless quality of *Days of Heaven* is apparent even in its quiet moments, as its narrative advances episodically. Natural phenomena showcase additional movement in the way that the light constantly changes, or how the wind brushes over the chaffs of wheat. These stirring features of the natural environment add to the dynamism of camerawork and editing. Malick's strategies of using these formal tools indicative of pure cinema are present throughout his oeuvre. Beginning with the first in his trio of contemporary films, we will further explore how these tendencies are utilised and intensified in *To the Wonder*.

Kinetic Strategies and Pure Cinema Techniques in *To the Wonder*

Malick's pure cinema techniques become more intensified, non-linear and kinetic in this first film of the Weightless trilogy. *To the Wonder* has a stream-of-consciousness narrative style that follows the emotional, romantic and spiritual concerns of Marina (Olga Kurylenko), Neil (Ben

Affleck), Jane (Rachel McAdams) and Father Quitana (Javier Bardem). These characters each deal with similar aspects of emotional turmoil which is suggested through the tumultuous and complicated narrative framework. Issues of movement are foregrounded and the visual and temporal rhythms of *To the Wonder* are far brisker and narratively complex, as if to express personal struggles in keeping up in the rush of the modern world. Sinnerbrink describes such editing as “capturing momentary intensities rather than continuous action” (TMFP, 181). Furthermore, Malick’s episodic sequences create an overarching montage structure to the entire film. Like Dulac’s filmmaking strategies, Malick concentrates on the aesthetic and thematic implications of light, while utilizing movement on scales of performance, objects, cinematography and editing to create cinematic rhythms of interest. These aspects facilitate an unspoken emotional drama that is articulated via pure cinematic tools, through issues of light, camera movement, rhythmic editing and their cumulative, mobile effects. Dulac’s ideal conception of cinema as a visual network of image associations, which disclose an interior life within the subjects, is an Impressionist idea that Malick echoes and exemplifies in his own oeuvre (Williams, 118-122). Considering these evident features, I will unpack issues of movement concerning light, camerawork and editing in order to analyse *To the Wonder* within a French Impressionist framework through pure cinema techniques. Here, Malick employs these aesthetics to illustrate impressions of his characters’ lives through cinematic movement, while using the sum of this movement to allude to an eventual state of personal transcendence.

There is a certain “breathless” economy of Malick’s flamboyant style, as its intensified kinetic editing exhibits only traces of the narrative in *To the Wonder* (Rijsdijk, 129). His characters never quite seem to dominate their surroundings as much as they are shaped by them (Chion, 49). As Malick’s organizing tactics approximate to formal conceptions of pure cinema, Keller writes that for Dulac pure cinema is similarly founded on visual associations and expressions in which to convey the lyrical, poetic and psychological dimensions of its themes and characters (OH, 164). She adds that cinema should “express something less causal, based on the drama of harmonies and rhythms in correspondence with the sensations and feelings of her protagonists” (OH, 164). Keller discusses this in relation to Dulac’s films, such as *La Souriante Madame Beudet* (1923), *Celles qui s’en font* (1928) and even her abstract works of the late-1920s.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that the same attention to rhythmic imagery that evokes dramatic interior states for Dulac correlates with Malick's own aesthetic strategies. One could reasonably substitute Malick into Dulac's seminal essay "Aesthetics, Obstacles, Integral *Cinégraphie*" as she offers that, "the filmmaker sets himself to work on the rhythm and the sonorities of images [...] their expressiveness could be appreciated in its own right without the assistance of text" (395). This similar aesthetic quality in Malick's imagery registers subjective experiences and emotions, guided by movement, within and between images. Moreover, Ted Geier writes how Malick's contemporary mode resists common narrative devices, "by breaking up the film into sequences; movements instead of scenes and shots" (13). As a distinct medium for artistic exploration and experimentation, cinema remains a profitable, richly complex apparatus for visual storytelling and channelling of subjective interiority. Such is the ethos and framework for both Dulac and Malick's aesthetic interests through pure cinema techniques that privilege expressive imagery as a framework for narration, subjective experiences and values of interiority.

Narratively, *To the Wonder* charts the romantic entanglements surrounding Neil and Marina, relayed through a chaotic visual-narrative framework which subverts standardized plot structures, by excluding exposition and revealing only the intervals between explicit plot details. In brief, many of the scenes in *To the Wonder* appear just before or after an unseen dramatic incident. Each brief image also harbours its own gestural quality, suggesting a connection to a more comprehensive narrative framework. Malick focuses on moments of preamble and hesitation, removing the need for action or verbal explication of the subject's feelings or motivations. An evident decrease in shot length, more kinetic montages and an energetic quality of imagery regards Dulac's notion that "a more rapid rhythm" can generate personal expressions distinct to cinema (AOIC, 396). As the most narratively episodic film of his career (at the time of its release), Malick often leaves it to the audience to infer the dramatic information, which is eschewed in favour of traces of emotional responses following the vestiges of story. It is worth noting that *To the Wonder* is also Malick's first film outside the realm of the period drama. Since *To the Wonder* occupies a modern setting (the early 2010s), the visual strategies which defined his previous films have become noticeably more energetic and chaotic as if to reflect these

conditions as they exist in contemporary life. These visual strategies further provide examples of Malick's style that relates to pure cinema.

The opening images of *To the Wonder* are telling, regarding the evolving dynamics of Malick's camerawork, which is often restless and wandering, as if it were a distinct character of its own (Brody). The strategies herein exhibit Bordwell's writings on intensified continuity, which will be explored further in chapter two. Malick's cinematography supplements his pure cinema techniques, with its aesthetic kinetic qualities. Conditions of movement and rhythm through camerawork and shot relations illustrate an emotional emphasis on Malick's characters, and here Dulac's advocacy for artistic expressions through these techniques has a suitable application (AOIC, 392). The film begins with snippets of amateur digital footage shot by the actors, showing various close-up images of the interior of a transit train and of the couple touring Paris. Affleck's own amateur footage introduces the first shots of *To the Wonder*. However, this improvised mode of shooting is soon passed over to the professional cinematography of camera operator Jörg Widmer and Lubezki. This cinematographic transition reveals Neil and Marina playfully fawning over one another inside the train, with Neil helming the video camera. The purpose of Malick giving his actors their own camera to freely experiment with, and incorporate into the film, facilitates a nuanced subjective character perspective through animated cinematography and creative authorship of both performance and production. These amateur and professional cinematographic approaches jointly promote dynamic camerawork: the grainy video clips that inaugurate the film and the sweeping Steadicam footage which constitutes the remainder. This visual strategy is suitable in echoing the transient quality of *To the Wonder*, which is constantly weaving through a stream of fragmented scenes, while charting the changing emotional, existential and religious concerns of its characters. This high frequency of cumulative movement stimulates dramatic sensations through juxtapositions and passing imagery, as Dulac advances in her rhetorical writings (ETC, 306-307).

Malick's stylistic tendency to privilege kinetic cinematography with the camera meandering and tracking through a jumbled series of narrative events is also evident in his subsequent film *Knight of Cups* and most demonstratively with *Song to Song* (Blasi, 24). Malick's camera

mobility further instils a sense of immersion, through which we can more perceptibly comprehend emotional insights of the characters. Attributing camera movement to subjectivity is telling, given Malick's own thoughts on the more static cinematography of *Badlands*: "I wanted to keep a distance from my characters, that's why I rejected hand-held camera movements" (Malick qtd. in Chion, 18). While *To the Wonder* appears to be a collection of partial moments of a fuller narrative, its episodic form creates a gentle sense of propulsion, due to the camera constantly moving either laterally or towards subjects and objects within the frame. This dynamic axis of movement shifts between horizontal planes of characters interacting on an earth-bound level where they are free to explore unmarked spaces; while the framing of the camera also expresses a spiritual significance through its vertical attention toward the sky, as the characters aspire towards the figurative light (SE, 185). Malick's emancipated and wandering camera supplements a perpetual motion that provides an impression of kinetic continuity, within its complicated montage imagery.

Like *Days of Heaven*, Malick uses different rhythmic pacing in his editing to suggest emotional qualities in his characters. Moreover, these qualities of movement exhibit Dulac's methods of visual techniques that connect the viewer to a subjective, inner life (VAF, 31-32). One of the slower sequences occurs during the passage where Neil reconnects with his old flame Jane. As the couple visits her ranch, images of buffalo grazing in the vast prairie landscape visually echo the Panhandle setting in *Days of Heaven*. Moreover, this segment is much more relaxed than most of the film, as the montage allots slightly longer shot lengths. Here, the evening sun also accents the animals and people, casting a soft light over each gently juxtaposed scene, and creating a fluid network of images that are aesthetically enriched by the cinematic qualities of light and movement. This is a time of promise and reprieve for Neil and Jane, though their budding romance is ultimately ephemeral, owing to Neil's recurring commitment issues. During his new start with Jane, Neil's emotional environment becomes more familiar, comfortable and stable, hence the loosened rhythmic patterns. However, the editing soon quickens, resuming is capricious meteoric intensity, as Jane is swept up in both the throes of a fitful romance and its spiralling end. The use of collective image mobility to signify character expressions, again, relays Dulac's advocating for movement to disclose personal interiority through its visual associations and rhythms, opposed to direct action and exposition (TDMC, 413-414).

The early sequence of Marina and Neil at the onset of *To the Wonder* also displays a mobile quality of camerawork that continues throughout the film, and supplements the “visual rhythms of life” alluded to by the film’s narrative montage style (AOIC, 396). These kinetic aspects of cinematography work with the rhythmic impacts of the editing, while connoting a sense of euphoria and romantic prospect for the lovers. As Lubezki’s camera weaves throughout episodic sequences, he often frames scenes at deliberately low angles. This perspective positions us towards the sky, as evidenced in the opening of the film when Marina and Neil journey through Paris, before driving to the Mont-Saint Michel. In an early sequence, the camera glides beneath trees, capturing sunlight beaming through the treetops, recalling Kazuo Miyagawa’s famed cinematography in *Rashomon* (Kurosawa, 1950). This visual framing recurs throughout Malick’s career, beginning notably in *The Thin Red Line*. Marina even tries to draw Neil’s attention towards the sky during their city stroll. Sunlight reflecting off the water is also a recurrent image, as seen bouncing off the Seine during the Paris sequences and on the muddy shores that surround the abbey, where the couple wade in the evening light. Malick’s attention to the ubiquity of light in nature, and its reflections in water, evokes Dulac’s abstract works of 1928, with *Arabesque* as an explicit example. These “purely visual” elements of both films are crucial to Dulac’s conceptions of pure cinema and cinematic expressivity, as detailed by Keller in her essay “Optical Harmonies.” Herein, light also assumes a thematic context of an emotional transcendence through love and faith, although as a pure cinema technique, light functions to evoke dramatic stakes within the characters.

Malick further utilises setting to highlight the aesthetic importance of light. This attributes to Dulac, who claims that kinetic, interrelated qualities of light can define cinematic settings (EC, 39). The initial seaside location by the abbey is also a visual segue away from the film’s prologue in France into the main locale of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, where Neil has taken Marina and her daughter Tatiana (Tatiana Chiline) to live. A match-cut shows a camera craning over the water’s edge at Mont-Saint Michel, then cutting to a tracking shot of their America pastoral neighbourhood, as Marina dances into the frame with the evening sun outlining her hair. The first

image of the bucolic American landscape is bathed in the light of Malick's familiar magic hour. Splintered narrative details show Neil and Marina gallivanting in the open fields before stopping to gaze at the fading colours of sunset on the horizon. This magic hour setting recurs throughout the film underscoring changing lighting conditions, providing backlighting and accentuating characters like Marina physically moving through these spaces by running and dancing. This convergence of light and the movement around actors encourages a more lyrical and suggestive understanding of *To the Wonder*, synthesizing formal properties which are purely cinematic and solidifying its visual language (LMC, 107-111). Moreover, this movement of Malick's performers echoes Dulac's interest in the "spectacle of light and motion," which she expresses in relation to Loïe Fuller (OH, 109). While Malick trades the pre-industrial Texas panhandle for a contemporary housing development in Oklahoma, the settings between *Days of Heaven* and *To the Wonder* are both comparable in their prairie landscapes and in their use of magic hour lighting in which to bridge fragmented sequences. Both films portray a network of experiences around mutable romance, where the transience of light is an integral aesthetic feature in paralleling its transient narratives. Matters of movement through performance, the camera and editing all intersect with light to create distinctly rhythmic, cinematic sensations. These pure cinematic tools all converge to foster a rich subjective study of image movement, using a montage of emotionally-charged moments that trace the interiorities of Malick's characters.

While the role of light functions in its relation to the divine, religiosity is not explicitly mentioned in *Days of Heaven*. However, in *To the Wonder*, Malick repeatedly frames light streaming through both domestic windows and stained-glass sanctuaries, emphasizing a transcendent quality to the light that is both religious and subjective. For Dulac, light entails a mobile quality that underscores the energies and motions of life, and this supplements our understanding for framing the lives of the characters (LMC, 122). Once the ancillary narrative of Father Quitana is introduced, the film begins further exploring the spiritual dimensions of light. Malick's efforts to privilege light's thematic implications brings a closer understanding towards the experiential, existential and religious plights of Neil, Marina and Quitana, who each struggle to connect with a higher fulfilment of love. While light takes on a thematic, religious context here, it can also be read in pure cinema terms. The way Malick frames natural lighting and

incorporates its passing qualities with the elliptical narrative illustrates a pure cinema technique that underscores the characters' emotions via expressive lighting and setting. *To the Wonder* uses this light to embody an inner yearning for self-fulfilment, as Dulac notes light's energetic mobility as a cinematic expression (LMC, 119-120). It is a constant source of both inspiration and aspiration for the characters, who often show deliberate attention to light, or are framed explicitly alongside of it in hesitating gestures. While the subjects onscreen are often reticent towards one another, much of their focus seems situated on their environment and its natural light. Behavioural gestures of gazing out onto the horizon and looking up to the sky are frequently exhibited, and their collective attendance to the visual environment equally directs the attention of the audience. To further highlight this, Affleck's first audible dialogue occurs over half an hour into the film, where he unsuccessfully tries to bond with Tatiana by explaining how the last band of light, perceptible in the fading magic hour, complements the earth's shadow on the horizon. It is a rich moment that articulates the disintegration of their trial family, emphasizing the presence of light to invoke ephemeral dramatic states. As the daylight fades into twilight, so dims the hope for Neil and Marina's relationship.

Even when Malick decides to integrate dialogue, as in this instance, attention is brought back to the aesthetics of light in correlation to the suggested interior drama. In relaying the religious associations with light, there is also a comic, yet poignant moment in the film between Quitana and the church custodian Sexton (Tony O'Gans). Upon noticing the emotional isolation in Quitana, Sexton tries encouraging him to feel the presence of light pouring through the stained glass church windows. He says to Quitana while pressing his hands against the glass panes: "I can feel the warmth of the light, brother. That's spiritual. I'm feeling more than just natural light." As explicitly stated here, Quitana is implored to step beyond his existential and religious loneliness by embracing the light as a source of solace and faith. For Quitana and the other characters, light is an emblem towards a state of consolation and transcendence. It is the need for reconciliation and solidarity within the conditions of mutable relationships, which aesthetically parallels the fluctuating conditions of natural light. In addition, while it may appear that Sexton's dialogue would preclude viewers from seeing this as a pure cinematic scene, there are evident impressionist tools that Malick uses which situate this example within Dulac's discourse.

Sexton's monologue itself exists within a montage, but various other disparate shot relations surround the scene, employing anecdotal editing strategies that convey Quitana's inability to outwardly affect, guide and be a part of the local community, and his inability to commune with God. Light has thematic resonance as an expression of faith, but it also functions as a visual tool for articulating Quitana's feelings: his yearning and isolation. The quality of movement via episodic editing uses purely cinematic techniques, to create emotional conditions that are illustrated through these visual techniques; along with the thematic, redemptive quality of light.

In discussing her early film *La Mort du soleil* (1922) Dulac writes that "in addition to the actor's countenance [...] the objects, lights, and shadows surrounding him, I gave these elements a visual value by calculating their intensity and rhythm to match my character's physical and mental state" (AOIC, 394). Within this expression, Malick also uses countenance, rhythmic images and light to disclose the thoughts and feelings which Quitana cannot utter. He rarely speaks because Malick, like Dulac, foregrounds the quality of imagery to indicate internal feelings (AOIC, 394-395). Malick consciously uses both the narrative ellipses and the quality of passing light to channel Quitana's emotional transience and his crestfallen demeanour. Dulac adds: "If we imagine many forms in movement unified within an artful structure composed of diverse rhythms in single images that are juxtaposed in a series, then we will successfully imagine an 'integral *cinégraphie*'" (AOIC, 396). Therefore, Malick's episodic form illustrates Quitana's internal mood through the sum of the movement involved in his pure cinema strategies of light and editing. By utilising expressive imagery and light as novel techniques of cinematic discourse, both Dulac and Malick stimulate audience engagement and imagination with rhythmic and aesthetically enriched images, crafting a more poeticised, pure cinema of personal feeling (Liebman).

Malick's use of artificial light is also of considerable interest, and it displays similar motions associated with natural lighting. In one sequence, the tentative family is seen romping around their nocturnal household, playfully using unsheathed lamps as torches. Interior daytime scenes also depict shadowy corridors, with streams of light pouring in from outside of the frame. In

addition, its angular contours outline the actual movement of light through changing shadows, while recalling Dulac's admiration for lights and shadows as potential and meaningful reflections of character feelings (AOIC, 394). In these domestic, indoor spaces such aesthetic light sources are ever-present, yet distant. As a visual element, it remains an aspiration that is distinguishable but just out of reach. The penultimate shot of the film shows Marina striding through a field. The sunlight is hidden behind stormy clouds as she looks over her shoulder to see an offscreen torch casting light across her visage. Who or where this source stems from is unclear, and her expressive reaction is quite ambiguous. One is also left to wonder whether this is a present moment for her, a memory or a vision. As an invested audience, we can only hope that this is love realized and shining upon her. Bradshaw (2013) writes: "The entirety of *To the Wonder* is a kind of unframed flashback [...] not a narrative so much as remembered feelings, glimpses and moments in narrative order and dreamily extended to epiphany length." This scene with Marina segues into the final image which is a reprise from the beginning of the film. In one of the few static images in *To the Wonder*, we see the ocean shore of Normandy cresting towards the distant, towering Mont-Saint Michel. This structure is symbolically a preamble of hope against dramatic currents which have flowed throughout the film. Known colloquially as *La Merveille*, the abbey stands as a final testament to a higher source of personal fulfilment for both Marina and Neil (TMFP, 177). It is a structural, spiritual antenna, spiralling towards the transcendent light that exists above. This closing image, albeit subtle, suggests the couple's early potential, in both passion and faith, towards achieving a complete sphere of wonder and transcendence through the coveted light.

We can contend that Malick's episodic plots are designed to resemble the subjective evocations of emotion, relying on the cumulative effects of movement through light, cinematography and editing to suggest interior dramatic stirrings. Similarly, Dulac also discusses how juxtaposed images impose cadence and rhythms that parallel the shifting movements of dramatic feeling (AOIC, 392-393). During the sequence where the family visits a fairground, one can see Marina in the foreground as a suspended swing ride spins before her [Figure 2]. The spinning onscreen machinery, prowling camera and kinetic editing collectively generate feelings of considerable unease as they spring forth in non-linear patterns. The montage is loaded with an emotional

context and the sum of these contrasting movements generate emotions purely through cinematic techniques (ETC, 306-307). This specific feeling correlates to a suggested violent, sexual encounter that occurred between Neil and Marina moments before. In that previous moment, their playful eroticism had gone too far and the bipolar dynamics of their affair pendulated from an “avalanche of tenderness,” by Marina’s account, to highly fragmented scenes of habitual domestic violence. A split-second match cut shows Neil and Marina pulling at each other, as their swinging bodies rhyme with the abrupt swinging of carnival rides. This revolving machine spins before her, mirroring her dizzying world, as she struggles to stay grounded in the volatile fluctuations of her relationship. This instance also visually echoes the scene of the Farmer standing on the rooftop before his weathervane in *Days of Heaven*. For Marina, the frantic, rhythmic activities within and between the images echo her emotional distress and feelings of romantic and existential malaise. This moment also signals the coming of atrophic incidents which slowly wear away at their relationship throughout the rest of the film.



Fig 2. Marina’s (Olga Kurylenko) emotional distress illustrated by the sum of movement through pure cinema techniques.

Dulac writes that “Visual impact is ephemeral, it’s an impression” (VAF, 34). This quote underscores the hasty quality of visual-narrative in *To the Wonder*, as Malick’s characters meander through mutable locations, moments and emotions in search of personal fulfilment. The struggle for happiness, in pursuit of love, remains a central concern of the narrative. The sum of all this movement is to convey a kinetic quality of contemporary life, experiences and internal feelings, which desires to settle with the stable conditions of genuine love (amorous, divine or self-reflective). In one of his sermons, Quitana voices: “Love is not only a feeling. Love is a duty. You shall love. Love is a command. And you say, ‘I can’t command my emotions, they come and go like clouds.’” Here, Malick situates the subject of love within a conceptual, visual platform that exists romantically, personally and spiritually. Love, and its transcendent qualities, is the chief subjective value and dramatic interest which orients the film. It is personified in light and charted in the beatific images which form brisk patterns of an emotional correlation. Malick does emphasize a fleeting state of emotions, but this is not a moral claim on his behalf. Rather, he curates an assembly of imagery that endeavours to relay an intense, network of emotional experiences. Malick dilates his images to augment character perspectives, allotting open impressions of their thoughts and feelings through voiceover and montage imagery. Formal tools of light and movement, along with the general impressionistic quality of his work, functions as a lens for revealing subject experience, which concerns Malick’s explorations of love and its entanglements (TMFP, 161-206). Sinnerbrink adds that impulsive, experiential novelties and hedonistic pursuits evident throughout the *Weightless* trilogy leave its subjects in an emotional/spiritual recoil, or a residual weightless feeling (TMFP, 162).⁶ As Malick focuses at this juncture of his career on contemporary dramas concerning subjects who struggle through romantic, existential and religious challenges, his impressionistic strategies remain integral for realizing these interior interests. Therefore, there is an overarching weightless aesthetic to his recent filmmaking style, which aligns pure cinema techniques with interior expressions.

⁶ These later films push to the limit Malick’s experimentation with narrative abstraction, impressionistic voiceover, allegorical presentation and the poetic evocation of mood through montage, camera movement and non-linear narration (TMFP, 163).

Chapter 2: Jean Epstein and Malick's Photogenic Strategies

This chapter will examine Jean Epstein's concept of *photogénie* and its relevance to the analysis of Terrence Malick's films. *Photogénie* is difficult to define, not least because of Epstein's impassioned and romanticised descriptions of the terms. As Sarah Keller notes, *photogénie* is "a notion usually accompanied by apologies for its abstraction, anagogy, or outright inexplicability" (GPEN). For my purposes, I will focus on the connections Epstein makes between *photogénie* and gestures, close-ups and movement. This loose framework will be deployed to consider how *photogénie* functions in key sequences in Epstein's film *Coeur Fidèle*. From there, the chapter will explore photogenic examples in Malick's films *The Thin Red Line* and *Knight of Cups*.

According to Christophe Wall-Romana, Epstein's career, beginning in the early 1920s, came at a "precarious time for the French movie industry that had lost its early global dominance in the course of World War One," (10-11). During this period, Epstein became associated with the French Impressionists, contributing his conceptual ideas and growing steady in influence as both a theorist and director. Richard Abel argues that "by the end of the silent film period, Jean Epstein was the most prominent, and controversial filmmaker in the French narrative avant-garde" (qtd. in Wall-Romana, 10-11). Epstein's major publications *Bonjour, cinéma* (1921) and *La Poésie d'aujourd'hui, un nouvel état d'intelligence* (1921) were published a year before his first film *Pasteur* (1922). Thus, his conceptual interests in the expressive and kinetic properties of cinema were intertwined with his filmmaking practice.

Interestingly, the concept of *photogénie* did not originate with Epstein. The term was originally coined by the French astronomer Arago in 1839, and can be translated as "created by light" (Wall-Romana, 25). *Photogénie* gradually shifted from the field of science to photography, and later into the burgeoning medium of cinema. Louis Delluc adopted the term in 1919 as a didactic slogan to signify "the special nature of filmic images" (Wall-Romana, 25). Following Delluc's death in 1924, Epstein assumed *photogénie* as a locus for his own theoretical discourse and

became its foremost proponent. However, his description of *photogénie* is less of a definition than it is a form of aesthetic posturing. He often used the appellation to designate the special aesthetic quality of an image as a transformative element and as “the purest expression of cinema” (OCCP, 315).

Epstein associated *photogénie* with the capacity of cinema to reveal or transform qualities of a person or object. He wrote in his essay “On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*”:

What is *photogénie*? I would describe as photogenic any aspect of things, beings; or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction. And any aspect not enhanced by filmic reproduction is not photogenic, plays no part in the art of cinema (314).

By Epstein’s theoretical proposition, *photogénie* describes things (e.g. physical phenomena) or beings whose “moral character” or artistic value is elevated by its cinematic rendering (OCCP, 314). Jan-Christopher Horak regards *photogénie* as something diffuse. It is “that elusive ambiance connected to a certain locale or human emotion” (4). By contrast, Keller asserts that it is direct, even incisive: “*Photogénie* is usually described as a moment of intense affect or revelation created by the cinema’s unique technological and formal capacity to transform our perception of the material world” (GPEN). And, as I discuss below, Epstein links *photogénie*’s transformational qualities with movement. He states, “only mobile aspects of the world, of things and souls, may have their moral value increased by filmic reproduction” (OCCP, 315). This quality that is associated with movement entails the expressive functions of certain cinematic techniques such as camerawork and editing, in addition to onscreen characters and objects/things.

In her introduction for *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, Keller writes that *photogénie* is realized in brief instants of aesthetically significant imagery through cinematic reproduction (25). In her opinion, *photogénie* entails a certain aesthetic aptitude of images that are emphasized onscreen for a short time. In his 1921 essay “Magnification,” Epstein suggests that the aptest structure for revealing *photogénie* involves expressive punctuations embedded within rhythmic imagery. He writes: “the photogenic is measured in seconds. If it is too long, I

don't find continuous pleasure in it [...] Until now, I have never seen an entire minute of pure *photogénie*" (JEM, 236). It is my contention that temporary pauses situated within rhythmic editing and/or montages reveal intensified moments of *photogénie*. These intense moments can provide the viewer with a sense of immediacy or enable them to experience a character's interiority. Despite its brevity, *photogénie* leaves a vivid impression upon the viewer. Keller argues that *photogénie* held a "vital significance," not just for the Impressionists, but for understanding the impacts of the concept on spectatorship and cinema as an evolving medium (GPEN).

Matz claims that the close-up was an essential visual tool for the French Impressionists because it facilitated a signature "Impressionist focus on the inner lives of its subjects" (108). Moreover, Epstein valued the close-up with "almost godlike importance" (OOC, 316). Just as light, movement and rhythm were the conceptual tools of pure cinema, visual arrangements juxtaposed with emotive and punctuated character close-ups were key organizing features involved in *photogénie*. Epstein delivered a passionate appeal for its artistic value, arguing that "The closeup, the keystone of the cinema, is the maximum expression of this *photogénie* of movement" (JEM, 235-240). According to Keller, Epstein favoured the close-up as an aesthetic expression of cinematic subjectivity and sensorial perspective (JERC, 33).

Keller asserts that the idea of *photogénie* is predicated on incomplete moments of suggestive gestures framed in close-ups. She writes that "*photogénie* indicates the cinema's ability to render events both through suggestion ('half-gestures'), as much as a poem might ('half-phrases'), and through repetition" (GPEN). When issued through a visual prism of kinetic montage sequences, facial gestures framed in close-ups can better exemplify photogenic instances. This filmic tension of gesture, close-up and phrasing is best elucidated by Epstein:

Even more beautiful than a laugh is the face preparing for it. I must interrupt. I love the mouth which is about to speak and holds back, the gesture which hesitates between right and left, the recoil before the leap, and the moment before the landing, the becoming, the hesitation, the taut spring, the prelude (JEM, 236).

The close-up, as cinematic gesture, highlights the physical gestures of the performers as their silent, incomplete expressions within fragmented narrative scenes signal revelatory, photogenic material. These privileged instances are arranged in conjunction with the dynamic content of the shot and the kinetic dimensions of editing which creates sensorial, visual rhythms that align the subjective framing of the close-up with the expressivity of the moving images.

Epstein's enthusiasm for the close-up was bound to the way it revealed physiognomic characteristics which, in turn, were able to communicate character's interiority in the absence of words. Within the immediacy of expression, there is a preamble or state of becoming which signifies *photogénie*. Epstein writes:

Muscular preambles ripple beneath the skin. Shadows shift, tremble, hesitate. Something is being decided. A breeze of emotion underlines the mouth with clouds. The orography of the face vacillates. Seismic shocks begin. Capillary wrinkles try to split the fault. A wave carries them. Crescendo. A muscle bridles. The lip is laced with tics like a theatre curtain. Everything is movement, imbalance, crisis (JEM, 235).

Here Epstein articulates the power and depth of emotion that can be found simmering beneath the surface of an actor's face. As an intensifying device, the close-up is a crucial tool for *photogénie*, according to Epstein, because it "limits and directs our attention," enabling viewers to focus on what is becoming within the frame (JEM, 236-239). Through close-ups, one can read the minute registers of expression through physiological phenomena: the welling of the eyes, wrinkled eyebrows, facial tics and nervous gestures. These intimate dimensions of an actor's visage function as "a conduit for complex expression" (DC, 91).

Epstein also connects *photogénie* with the ways in which cinema organizes and deploys time and movement. He writes in 1924: "Photogenic mobility is a mobility in this space-time system [...] the photogenic aspect of an object is a consequence of its variations in space-time" (OCCP, 316). This encourages the view that spatial and temporal movement produce a transformative quality of the onscreen images and subjects. As an aesthetic technique, we can read this in terms of editing and how image ephemerality in shot relations can indicate photogenic conditions through

the movement and rhythm of cutting. For Epstein, the “fleeting effervescence” of *photogénie* also depended on editing strategies (GPEN). He claimed that in a conscious effort to “capture the immediacy of time in the present tense,” and through editing rhythms that accentuate a photogenic notion of becoming, cinema could formulate images to produce a “pregnant moment of presence that punctuates and interrupts the standard, continuous, linear flow of time” (JECL, 37). The gestures within a shot thus combined with cinematography and rhythmic shot relations to create the aesthetic experience he championed. Therefore, Epstein advocates for expressive cutting that provides a quality of feeling, and through this form he presents heightened aesthetic content concerning the images themselves, and the subjects and objects within the frame. Epstein’s strategies thus privilege a type of associative editing which relies on emotionally expressive arrangements of imagery through cinematic technique, versus a more classically functional narrative rationale.

Trond Lundemo also contends in terms of strategies of movement via editing, that Impressionist cinema can operate on systems of varying time scales to indicate rhythmic expression (219-220). He argues that for Epstein the spatiotemporal variations associated with cinematic editing generate a non-linear, associative quality that is better able to gauge the subjective interests of both characters and audiences (219-220). As a technology, the cinema uses these techniques of editing and montage to illustrate character feelings that are not easily or logically articulated. As such, montage for the Impressionists does not function as an intellectual montage (i.e. Soviet montage) nor as contracted continuity editing, but rather, it stimulates an associative quality that uses shot relations and their movements to express character feelings. Montage strategies are notable in Dulac’s 1927-1928 cycle of films, and Epstein’s key films of the 1920s: *Coeur Fidèle*; *Six et demi onze* (1927); *La Glace à trois faces* (1927); *La Chute de la Maison Usher* (1928); and *Sa Tête* (1928). If Epstein is equating photogenic authenticity to kinetic editing patterns that underscore image ephemerality, then the fleeting quality of images is integral to its expression of a sense of character interiority. The mobility of shot relations is thus tethered to an underlying aesthetic quality of fractured, subjective and experiential movement. The dynamic qualities of such editing strategies are consistent with the associative logic of art cinema, which resists the more logical trends of classical narratives. In response to this, the Impressionists’

experimentations with time within their narratives are inclined to instigate rhythmic affects and subjective insights through creative image patterns that disrupt continuity in order to grip and inspire the audience. Epstein's discourse was bound in these arguments as he asserts that "Everything is composed of quantified movement [...] conceived in space and time" (qtd. in Kline, 76). The Impressionist agenda therefore emphasizes these techniques of the medium through issues of movement between and within images to denote complexities and subjective perceptions through the cinema as a technology. Temporality and its expressive variation through montage was thus a key strategy through which to implement this aesthetic approach.

T. Jefferson Kline asserts that in Epstein's late monograph *Le Cinéma du diable* (1949), he posited an alternative approach to time in cinema. In Kline's view, Epstein rejected the linear rationale of traditional films narratives in favour of more associative film strategies. The latter could be untethered from the limitations of both verbal language and the cogent, expository plot arrangements of commercial filmmaking. Epstein appealed to an intuitive side of our sense relation to cinema, where disruptions in linear temporal logic resituate a prior reliance on causal logic (76). These attitudes in valuing the kinetic aspects of cinema are evident in Epstein's "poetic films of the 1920s which experimented with fragmentation and images distorted through odd montage, superimposition and acceleration" (Kline, 79). Here, Kline notes Epstein's use of special effects and montage that not only creates sensorial movement within the imagery but also reveals dramatic sensations that are inherently kinetic. Both Keller and Kline unpack Epstein's work to relay how photogenic mobility (which operates on temporal, physical and dramatic scales) reveals an aesthetically rich, transient quality of imagery that supersedes the rationale of words. As such, this enables viewers to explore the experiential and emotional faculties of how photogenic imagery can evoke character experiences through linear fragmentation via montage strategies.

Photogénie also has similarities with pure cinema. Keller claims, for example, that *photogénie* is the essence of cinematic specificity because it exceeds spoken dialogue, and instead relies on image movement to highlight its own cinema-specific qualities and poetic suggestions that point to personal character feelings in the narrative (GPEN). Érik Bullot contends that, "*Photogénie*

presupposes an amplification on the cinematic sign,” evoking a cinematic language which underscores an interest in the kinetic qualities of cinematography, shot relations and subject/object movement within the frame (248). Moreover, Bulloz notes that Epstein ascribes intrinsic movement, cinematic reproduction and an “exclusivity to objects, techniques, or spectators,” as crucial principles of photogenic capability (248).⁷ Both Impressionist conceptions of *photogénie* and pure cinema encourage cinema-specific images that are aesthetically transformative through image-driven techniques that accentuate interiority. Epstein claims that through *photogénie*, “The cinema must seek to become,” pressing the notion of becoming through cinematic potential, aesthetic creativity and personal transformation (OCCP, 315). There is a sense of immediacy in the photogenic image as a momentary pause within a montage sequence. This idea of immediacy works with movement in cinema and can be attributed to rhythmic photogenic properties that are subjectively revealing.

As features and expressive values of both avant-garde and art cinema, rhythm and image movement exhibit distinct qualities that would not be readily available to classical narratives. As discussed in the previous chapter, rhythmic imagery can be used to dictate the emotional landscapes of characters facilitated by visual and poetic phrasings. This elicits spectator interest through suggestive capacities of narrative ambiguity and affective imagery (ARR, 130-141). Aesthetic principles of rhythmic and kinetic imagery are not only formal features unique to cinema as an artistic medium but can potentially generate meaning within a cumulative sensation of cinematic movement (ARR, 130-141). Artistic rhythms generated from camera movement⁸ and editing create an expressive, non-verbal language through which to evoke character interiority. Keller touches on the rhythmic parallels of poetry and cinema, discussing how a personal aesthetic response towards expressive imagery is achieved through the patterns of both written word and imagery (ARR, 130-132). She aligns qualities of kinetic rhythm with poetic phrasings. Keller writes, “Poetry makes careful structural use of the rhythm of words and their silences to achieve effects of both sense and feeling” (ARR, 131-132). These poetic

⁷ For more on gesture, non-verbal language systems and *photogénie*’s ability to “constitute an autonomous language of visual signs, akin to gestures and ideographs” (246) refer to Bulloz’s essay “Thoughts on *Photogénie Plastique*.”

⁸ i.e. movement on its axis and tracking shots.

arrangements can indicate feelings for subjects that are calm and relaxed or those which are more complex, through intensified visual rhythms that express a state of turmoil. *Photogénie* can achieve similar effects to poetry through kinetic and rhythmic compositions and editing.

It is perhaps because of its poetic qualities (it is both allusive and elusive) that Epstein's concept of *photogénie* has been criticised for being vague, mystified and even indulgent. Matz, for example, faults *photogénie* for its tendency to fetishize mobility as a means of transformative, pictorial movement, whose slippery discourse has led to a tentative understanding of its value as an aesthetic concept (113-114). For Matz, its excessive level of photographic finesse failed to unify in "its diverse properties a coherent objective," which may be one reason for the Impressionist movement's brief tenure in film history (113-114). Wall-Romana acknowledges that "*photogénie* is a hyper-aesthetic phenomenon, or a heightened mode of viewing through which objects and beings animated by film appear more intense to perceivers" (26). It is true that *photogénie* can be difficult to define and that the experience is usually brief and subjective. Thus, it is appropriate to examine it in relation to some of Epstein's films, especially *Coeur Fidèle*, before turning our attention to *The Thin Red Line* and *Knight of Cups*.

Photogénie in Coeur Fidèle

For Epstein, *Coeur Fidèle/The Faithful Heart* is a crucial work that showcases *photogénie* through rhythmic editing and close-ups. In this film, Epstein utilises a melodramatic scenario, emotionally charged montages and tight framings to denote his characters' internal feelings and the "urgency or inexpressibility of love" (Kirtland, 95-96). The narrative concerns the exploited Marie (Gina Manès) and her downtrodden admirer Jean (Léon Mathot) who are driven apart by the violent actions of local thug Petit-Paul (Edmond van Daele). In terms of *photogénie*, we will focus on *Coeur Fidèle*'s justly famous and visually dynamic carousel sequence, which had been fermenting in Epstein's mind since 1921 (Kirtland, 95-96). By using expressive montage imagery to situate his characters, Epstein could exhibit "the importance of intense experience for accessing the ineffable creative capabilities of the subconscious" (Kirtland, 95-111). Wall-Romana suggests that in *Coeur Fidèle*, Epstein attempted to combine the general working-class

melodrama with an avant-garde visual style and non-linear narrative strategies to create a unique type of film with which to engage audiences (51).

In the carousel section of *Coeur Fidèle*, the orphaned cabaret servant Marie is coerced by the brutish Petit-Paul to the fairgrounds against her will, although she longs to be with the dockworker Jean, who searches for her desperately. During the sequence, a petrified Marie is placed in contrast with the inebriated Petit-Paul and his gleeful, histrionic behaviour. In one instance, adorned with wind-swept streamers, Petit-Paul casts confetti in the air, ornamenting himself and Marie in this affair, cruelly redolent of a forced wedding. As they are seated on the carousel, the sequence is composed of busy frames. We see balloons trembling in the breeze, rides, swings and whirling machinery. The constant movement in the shot is combined with an array of cinematic tools such as dizzying point of view (POV) shots, fades, superimpositions and rapid, disorienting cuts. Epstein creates a stunning collage that both disrupts and rejects the traditional continuity organization of space and time, but does so in a manner consistent with his notion of photogenic mobility (OCCP, 316). Kirtland argues that the sequence highlights the tensions of motion and stasis throughout and Epstein positions this quality of aesthetic tension as indicative of *photogénie* (Kirtland, 94; GPEN). The visual excess in this staccato display of machinery and subjects through turbulent shot variations develops a sense of anxiety in the characters while also eliciting the audience's experiential nervousness.⁹

The carousel sequence largely eschews logical narrative content. This allows the flux of images to take precedence and generate an emotional response through association. During the swift succession of images, we see several close-ups. Two prominent photogenic moments include Jean's shocked expression upon discovery of Marie's capture and Marie's look of dismay at her situation [Figures 3 and 4]. These are important instances of *photogénie*, as Epstein uses close-ups to highlight crucial points of emotional interest as Jean and Marie are shown reacting to their respective emotional distresses. These close-ups linger for a few seconds during a chaotic stream

⁹ Interestingly, this instance in *Coeur Fidèle* also shares a visual connection with the fairground sequence in *To the Wonder*.

of images, granting us a moment to pause, breathe and dwell on the characters' reactions. Epstein uses the close-up as a key device in framing *photogénie*, as situated in accelerated montage imagery and this is evident in *Coeur Fidèle*. He also notes that spatio-temporal variation, or expressive rhythms in editing, is an important formula for constructing *photogénie* (TEC, 25). In terms of photogenic moments, the close-up can therefore be viewed as a device for revealing the interiority of Epstein's characters, within a network of moving images (Wall-Romana, 111).



Fig 3. Revelation and emotional distress issued via photogenic close-up with Jean (Léon Mathot).



Fig 4. Gina Manès' close-up reveals a complex, underlying and emotional interiority for Marie.

In 1921, Epstein said that an “aesthetic of the kaleidoscope requires constant mobility,” and this is something that he relates to both modern poetry and cinema (Epstein qtd. in Kirtland, 95-97). Visualizing this disorienting imagery as analogous to heightened subjectivity, *Coeur Fidèle* illustrates a kaleidoscopic aesthetic through its accelerated images, hectic frames, visual abstractions and confusing editing strategies (Kirtland, 95-97). Mirrored by the “amorphous rotational force” of the carousel, Marie feels trapped and immobilized by her circumstances, which generally follow melodrama conventions (Kirtland, 94). Kirtland states that Epstein’s idea of the unconscious operates in accordance with an associative logic, revealing attributions of character interiority via experientially energetic visual strategies (101). Concerning this sequence, Keller writes: “It is one of the centrepieces of the film’s visual experimentation, with subjective shots from the perspective of the ride, blurring fast-motion of movement, fast cuts between ringing bells, the horses on the merry-go-round, swings, and crowds” (DC, 98). For Epstein, *photogénie* is “like a spark that appears in fits and starts,” implying that non-causal disruptions in space and time within a film allow for a stronger sense of immediacy, and, therefore, revelatory photogenic moments (JEM, 236). Epstein’s conceptions of photogenic mobility entail privileged moments situated in a motley collection of images through cinematic

strategies of kinetic objects, camerawork and editing. These moments often register as highlighted close-ups that pause from expressive montages.

The carousel sequence parallels the final scene of the film, which shows the reunited Marie and Jean on the same ride. By the end of *Coeur Fidèle*, Petit-Paul has been shot by Marie's disabled neighbour (Marie Epstein) and the couple is finally liberated from his menace. However, the dramatic events which brought them to this (otherwise cathartic) moment have left an indelible traumatic impression on the couple. Rather than re-presenting the maze of quick images from the early scene at the fairgrounds, the final scene fixates on the couple seated on the ride, with the world spinning behind them. Respective close-ups show a seemingly content Marie, while Jean is noticeably shell-shocked by the narrative events. While most commercial drama films would celebrate the triumph of love in its denouement, Epstein runs counter to melodramatic tropes by deflating expectations through Jean's reaction, thus destabilizing the relationship (Kirtland, 98). Wall-Romana contends that *Coeur Fidèle* thus eschews the catharsis of a more conventional denouement of romantic reconciliation, and instead reflects on the emotional turmoil of traumatic events imprinted on the characters (59).

The previous rapid montage of Marie and Petit-Paul is replaced with a sequence of much longer shot lengths, perhaps implying that everything is emotionally settled with Jean. However, Jean's countenance and close-ups of him reveal an expression of dejection, creating another moment of discernible *photogénie*. His silent facial expressions gesture a despondent feeling that is further accentuated by the increased length of shots and the gyrating movement that exists in the spinning background. Keller notes the ambivalence of their respective close-ups and questions the film's conclusion of their amorous union (DC, 99). She argues that while "the camera corroborates the destabilization of their happy, ideal love [...] it also isolates the characters through the cut, effectively separating them" (DC, 99). Although the kinetic quality of the earlier sequence is no longer evident, Epstein uses double exposure with a POV perspective of an actual kaleidoscope, overlaying an image of Jean and Marie, to directly visualise the unsettling feelings which still exist for Jean. The tensions aroused between the fixed frame of the camera, the

rhythmic revolution of the ride and Epstein's conscious insert instil a cumulative sense of emotional movement, photogenic mobility and an undercurrent of internal disquiet that pervades the closing scene.

We find these pregnant, or privileged moments of *photogénie*, to be pauses in montages which exhibit subjective close-ups to convey internal feelings. The perceptible moments of *photogénie* in the first carousel sequence denote mutual feelings of anxiety for Marie and Jean. However, in the final sequence, the emotional implications are more ambiguous, as Marie appears content and Jean remains soberly distressed. Nevertheless, Epstein's photogenic mobility functions to foreground an emotional character interest, despite potentially equivocal understandings of those feelings. *Photogénie* is rooted in this associative quality, which accounts for much of its slippery discourse. This disorienting, rhythmic framework which houses photogenic moments appears in other Epstein films such as *Sa tête* and *La Tempestaire* (1947) and, moreover, this critical approach can be applied to Malick's work to interpret his aesthetic strategies. As I will argue, Malick's films also create *photogénie* through close-ups, narrative pauses, reflective moments and flashbacks.

Photogénie in The Thin Red Line

The Thin Red Line (*TTRL*) marked Malick's return to filmmaking after a twenty-year hiatus. An adaptation of James Jones' novel is suitable for its multiple narrative strands and characters' reflections on war; it also contains several voiceovers and flashbacks, as well as significantly increased camera movement. As various critics have suggested, although *The Thin Red Line* is ostensibly a war film, Malick's underlying interest is subjectivity and the greater human experience. James Batcho writes that in *TTRL*, Malick breaks down the narrative logic and "reterritorialize[s] time in fragments, giving flight to a multiplicity of durations" (118). This indicates Malick's anecdotal narrative style that includes multiple characters and narrative passages. Batcho adds that Malick uses an episodic structure to convey interior thoughts, complicate causality and evoke inward expressions of cinematic imagery as a "memory-recollection-imagining" (118-119). He argues that, in this respect, the film is influenced by the

philosophical perspectives of Gilles Deleuze and Soren Kierkegaard (117-119). Much of the academic discourse on Malick's centres around such philosophical approaches, and thus his art cinema mode. Manning contends that "Malick brings ideas alive by giving us an opportunity to think dialectically" by contemplating the inner lives of his characters in conjunction with the real world (167). David Sterritt claims that the film's "meditative functions of inner speech privilege emotional depth over linear, logical meaning" (12). While Malick's film uses classical strategies of dynamic action sequences, it also makes liberal use of flashbacks, voiceovers and close-ups, to privilege character interiority. Within these art cinema strategies that exchange conventional narrative causality for artistic expressivity, we find aesthetics that point towards *photogénie*. Malick's episodic narrative strategies, intensified camera movement and frequent attention towards expressive natural light generates a quality of image movement that suggests these characters are moving towards states of transcendence. As these responses imply, the film offers several sequences that can be analysed in terms of *photogénie*.

The Thin Red Line does not begin with an action sequence or preparations for battle, as we might expect from a war film. Instead, we see various shots of Private Witt (Jim Caviezel), who is AWOL, relaxing in what appears to be a tropical paradise with Malay islanders. This sequence clearly recalls the idyllic middle section of *Days of Heaven*. The passage of time is aptly pacific as disparate scenes merge together languidly. Like *Days*, the human presence is counterpointed by occasional shots of animals in *TTRL*. The first shot of the latter focuses on a crocodile gliding into the slough. As Manning says, "All Malick's films are punctuated by shots of natural surroundings" (169). Here the presence of nature, extant beyond subjective concerns of the soldiers, flows along according to its own placid rhythms. Moreover, by focusing on the rhythms evident in this opening sequence as it relates to Witt's casual, internal attitudes (and the film's episodic quality as a whole) we can better unpack Wall-Romana's position of Epstein's legacy and an "Epsteinian animism" in *TTRL* (199).

Witt's "days of heaven" do not last, however, and he is captured, thrown into the brig and thrust back into the theatre of World War II. While contemplating his situation behind bars, a brief

flashback appears of Witt as a boy in Kentucky. The scene passes in slow-motion as pieces of straw float through the air. The slight alteration in the editing pace, paired with a medium close-up reaction shot of Witt, brings the audience closer in line with his subjectivity. Extracted from his island, and aware of the conflicts to come, Witt finds solace in his memories. This photogenic framework aligns with Epstein's claim that "The photogenic is conjugated in the future and the imperative," as Witt's memory is the only escape from his present existential distress and anxiety about the future (JEM, 236). Malick privileges his subjectivity with a close-up, where Witt is seen quietly thinking. This physical gesture remains suspended as an emotional, imperative moment for Witt, as a close-up of him fixates on his non-verbal countenance. His eyes gaze offscreen and hold a thoughtful expression, considering both past and future, and echoing Epstein's consideration for fleeting gestures that are conjugated in an associative context (JEM, 236). The photogenic context of this image, as an accentuated subjective moment postured alongside expressive editing, positions *TTRL* as an unusual war film.¹⁰ While it uses classical strategies of dynamic action sequences, it also makes liberal use of flashbacks, voiceovers and close-ups, to privilege subjectivity and interiority. Within these art cinema strategies that exchange classical causality for artistic expressivity, we find aesthetics that point towards *photogénie*.

When the men of C Company prepare to make shore for Guadalcanal, the shot lengths begin to decrease and the pace of the editing becomes more intensified. The cutting edges move towards a montage style, to invoke the anxiety and frenzy of the men distressed by the upcoming conflicts. While montage works in a conventional sense to denote upcoming, dramatic action sequences, Malick also uses this editing to signify character emotions through association. Rhythms of the editing provide a correlation with character interiority, and part of this is relayed through flashback sequences. During this point of the film, there is a short flashback for Private Bell (Ben Chaplin) as he recalls warm memories with his wife Marty (Miranda Otto). Malick uses magic hour cinematography during these moments, with waning sunlight filtering through the treetops as the couple embraces amorously. While there are just three cuts within the flashback, Malick contracts this anecdote by skipping around in place and time. The movement of the shots

¹⁰ "the film invites us to rethink the war genre film as it has been asserted over time" (Manning, 166).

exemplifies Epstein's notional photogenic mobility, which he professes exists in a space-time system where the index of moving images is found (and crucially defined) both spatially and temporally (OCCP, 315-316). *Photogénie's* slippery definition is applicable here as Malick's episodic narrative shifts between different story fragments and memories, where the kinetic quality of the imagery signifies both the anxieties of the soldiers and a personal interest in Bell through non-linear imagery.

Bell's recollections appear throughout much of *TTRL*, adding to the associative quality of the narrative. For instance, when Bell is doing reconnaissance up Hill 210, there is a third flashback. Here, Malick presents an elliptical montage showing medium close-ups of the couple in personal moments of affection. These image-driven strategies are of interest in their spatiotemporal variations in the narrative, creating a subjective, fragmented and photogenic memory collage for Bell. As for Malick's use of perceptible *photogénie*, Epstein writes that "only mobile and personal aspects of things, beings and souls may be photogenic" (OCCP, 317). These moving and personal features are further evident in this sequence as the cuts are more rapid than in previous flashbacks and the editing is more non-linear. Moreover, while we are seemingly in Bell's memory, there are several close-ups of Marty, suggesting her involved perspective as well; although, close-ups of Bell bookend the flashback itself. In *TTRL*, Malick often blurs our understanding of subjective attribution, as voiceovers do not always align with the characters depicted onscreen.¹¹ The source of this particular memory is potentially ambiguous, as there are close-ups of both lovers, while Marty's voiceover can also be heard urging Bell to join her. As such, Malick's narratives seem to exist within a nexus of shared experience, where a sense of subjectivity is further complicated by the involvement of multiple perspectives. As Bell (and Marty?) recall poignant, fleeting moments of the past, Malick's use of close-ups and accelerated mobile strategies through swifter cuts and the tracking camerawork (both within the flashbacks and in Guadalcanal) provide the audience with visual cues and a general photogenic mobility that signify key moments of emotional concern for the characters. Given the increased cutting within

¹¹ Often images of Witt are overlayed with the voiceover of Private Train (John Dee Smith).

the flashback, use of close-ups, the highly subjective space of Bell's shared memory and its overall brevity, this sequence is consistent with Epstein's ideas about *photogénie*.

Close-ups are utilised throughout the film as ephemeral expressions, often situated within montages that do not always align to traditional action sequences. "The close-up limits and directs the attention," asserts Epstein, and Malick uses this cinemagraphic framing to highlight performance gestures of characters through editing, camerawork and their facial inflections (JEM, 239). In *TTRL*, Malick privileges close-ups to capture heightened moments for characters, while their performances often signal facial expressions and reactions outside of (i.e. before or after) a dramatic event. Rapid cutting typically frames these close-ups in order to counterpoint their reflective pauses. An example of this occurs when Sergeant Keck (Woody Harrelson) mistakenly pulls the pin from a grenade attached to his belt. In a fleeting close-up, which lasts but a few seconds, Keck stares at the pin with eyes dilated and mouth agape. Within this quick moment Keck recognizes the lethal implications of his error and quickly looks over towards Bell, before leaping to his side to suppress the explosion. This incredibly brief yet critically dramatic moment for Keck occurs in a swift instance of intense subjective interest. In a similar photogenic moment shortly thereafter, Captain Staros (Elias Koteas) debates with Lieutenant Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte) about attack plans for taking Hill 210. Tall aggressively demands a frontal assault which Staros knows to be suicidal. After Tall rejects his suggestion of a safer flanking manoeuvre, Malick presents a moment of *photogénie* with Staros as he pauses to consider his next action. The close-up of Staros is ripe with emotional intensity as Epstein claims that, "The cinematic feeling is therefore particularly intense. More than anything else, the close-up releases it" (JEM, 240). Staros' lips tremble, he blinks and sighs nervously before informing Tall that he rejects the commanding order. This decision is pivotal for Staros, as he knows that this act of insubordination, while crucial to saving the lives of his men, will entail serious repercussions for his military status. Through close-up framings, which foreground acute emotional moments, Malick issues occasions of *photogénie* that exhibit key passing instances for his characters. Keck and Staros provide fleeting gestures which harbour complex emotions and signal responses which remain just on the cusp of dramatic reactions, as they reflect on the gravity of their respective situations in these moments of *photogénie*.

Another memorable photogenic moment of reflection occurs with a medium close-up of Tall sitting quietly in the debris of a ransacked encampment after the outfit of soldiers begin gaining greater control of the island. In silence, the camera focuses on Tall's face with tears welling in his eyes [Figure 5]. Within this photogenic framework, Tall embodies emotional qualities Epstein associates with brief close-ups, which he calls "the soul of cinema" (JEM, 236). Tall appears to be contemplating victory and the sacrifices that have led the battalion to this point. However, this conventional narrative information remains unclear. Yet, Tall's countenance conveys something more, as he sighs and mouths a few indistinct words that never arrive. Up until this point, Tall has mostly been boisterous and outspoken. In contrast, this more introverted expression harbours an ambivalence of inner turmoil and relief, magnifying his intense feelings rendered via medium close-up. Tall's countenance echoes Epstein's impassioned reflections on the aesthetics of close-ups as he writes: "the lip is laced with tics like a theater curtain. Everything is movement, imbalance, crisis. The mouth gives way, like a ripe fruit splitting open" (JEM, 235). Tall gestures towards an outward expression that remains explicitly withdrawn, as he breathes heavy, winces and holds back the tears that are welling in his eyes. This moment of interiority exhibits features of *photogénie*, as Tall's weathered visage and uncharacteristic reticence work in conjunction with the editing patterns to disclose his underlying emotions. Before this image Malick inserts shots of Tall's surroundings, and after this moment of *photogénie* Malick shows soldiers burning down the camp at night. As such, Malick's attention towards Tall is a respite from the more kinetic editing rhythms, with Tall facially gesturing a simmering expression (a need to speak aloud, to voice feeling). Through these photogenic strategies, Malick provides a moment of personal importance for Tall by signalling an important dramatic interest through *photogénie*.



Fig 5. Lt. Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte) contemplates the trials and victories of war in this silent, expressive close-up.

There are noticeably more kinetic sequences, some more elliptical than others, after the two-hour mark of the film. At this point in the narrative, the primary conflicts surrounding Guadalcanal are finished. The soldiers are left to contemplate their interior status, wrought and disheartened by war. Such interiority is expressed chiefly in the dislocated voiceovers of Privates Train and Bell, as they offer various philosophical perspectives. Train reflects: “War don’t ennoble men, it turns em’ into dogs. Poisons the soul.” It is during these reflections that kinetic montage sequences occur, such as the soldiers bitterly assaulting the vulnerable Japanese captives. It is not always clear whether these reflections are meant to be individual or a larger multi-perspective. While Malick undoubtedly focuses on key individuals in the film, his art cinema narrative strategies complicate clear connections between certain reflections and characters. This prompts the audience to consider a greater human connection amongst his characters, the world and how subjective concerns can account for more inclusive, humanistic issues. Moreover, Epstein writes how the “personality” of objects and subjects are “elected to life by cinema,” expressing that through movement and a personal interest in filmic imagery, one finds moments of *photogénie*

through specific images valued in their filmic reproduction (OCCP, 317). Malick utilises and embraces kinetic qualities of cinematic imagery through editing, roving camerawork and natural light that relates to Epstein's photogenic mobility and highlights his contention of a personal quality of "things, beings and souls" (OCCP, 317). These formal techniques further exemplify Epstein's theoretical claims and his aesthetic framework. Perhaps this also exemplifies Witt's musing when he postulates: "Maybe all men got one big soul everybody's part of, all faces are the same man." This would account for a key subjective interest in the characters, who are connected through a holistic spiritual perspective, or one big soul.

Malick's art cinema mode aligns with his photogenic strategies to obscure direct narrative understanding. While *TTRL* exhibits certain themes, such as the human condition amidst the volatility of war, Malick's film loosens "cause-effect linkage of events" throughout much of its story, especially during the many montage sequences, which provide associative image relations, instead of simply contracting linear events (ACMFP, 57). Malick shows more interest in provoking questions rather than providing cogent answers to his subjects' philosophical and internal enquiries and this lack of explicit causality contributes to the film's episodic structure (Manning, 165-175). A sense of personal immediacy is ultimately narratively oblique, as immediate thoughts are rarely conclusive themselves (Manning, 165-175). Character musings appear dislocated from the narrative itself and instead seem to address broader issues of personal crises on a polyphonic scale. Bordwell further claims that in art cinema narration this "boundary situation" occurs when a character's circumstances carry wider existential implications, as is the case with Witt, Bell and others in *TTRL* (NFF, 207-208). While conventionally obscure, Malick's interrogative voiceovers, use of close-ups and photogenic mobility through montage, situate a key aesthetic interest in subjectivity in *TTRL*. Through his art cinema strategies of expressive and associative imagery, in lieu of causal narration, Malick provides a correlation between the kinetic quality of imagery and feelings of the characters. This "pictorial language", enlivened through general image movement, underscores Epstein's claims of what constitutes *photogénie* (OCCP, 315).

The narrative ambiguities of art cinema are evident in the final scene of Witt's death. After he distracts the Japanese scouts, so that his fellow soldiers can escape the river undetected, Witt finds himself surrounded and outgunned. In this pivotal moment Malick stresses the importance of the close-up juxtaposed with a non-causal editing sequence, to present a profitable instance of *photogénie*. Malick's elevated quality of imagery via this critical approach to *photogénie* presents a crucial instance of personal importance for Witt, and this moment exhibits what Wall-Romana refers to as a "self-contained poetic quality" through its essence of situation and personal importance (2). In a final photogenic medium close-up of Witt, he quietly contemplates his life as Malick limits and directs our attention, by lingering on Witt's hesitating, arrested expression (JEM, 239). As the camera slowly tracks backwards, we cut to a profile of him sacrificially lifting his rifle and being shot dead. Abruptly, Malick cuts to an image of sunlight pouring through the jungle canopy, then shifting to a flashback of Witt swimming with the Malay children. Even in Witt's conscious surrender to death, *TTRL* presents a memorialised sequence and a privileged, final close-up to cement its photogenic qualities and cycle back to the film's opening moments. There is a transcendent quality in this moment signalled by the upwards sunlight and Witt's return to a haven space. Malick's suggestion of Witt's personal transcendence echoes the Impressionist ethos regarding their collective aspiration for a sublime image quality. *TTRL*'s use of flashbacks, associative montages and close-ups add up to an aesthetic, photogenic quality that underscores Malick's emphasis on interiority through art cinema and French Impressionist methods.

Intensified Continuity and *Photogénie* in *Knight of Cups*

Malick raises his Impressionist, art cinema strategies to a considerable degree in his central work of the Weightless trilogy: *Knight of Cups*. Given Malick's growing inclination for non-linear, episodic narratives throughout his career, James Batcho contributes that "This fragmentation and disassociating tendency in Malick becomes more amplified in *To the Wonder* and *Knight of Cups*" (138). The associative, photogenic framework of rapid editing and tight framings in this film reaches a point of intensified narration, with an encompassing montage style that overwhelms the story to the point where only interval points in the plot can be understood clearly. This lack of logical narrative exposition means that the story is hard to follow, as the

film is cut like quicksilver. The viewer is instead invited to interpret *Knight of Cups*' aesthetic strategies of cumulative image movement through its camerawork, editing, onscreen objects and light, as well as its close-up framings, in order to make sense of the story, its characters and its interior interests. Malick's fitful narrative provides a platform from which to survey and distil *Knight of Cups*' inherent, photogenic aesthetics through issues of kinetic imagery and close-ups. Moreover, the sum of all this movement provides a cinematic form which mirrors the shiftlessness of Malick's characters, as they navigate chaotic lifestyles that augur towards personal states of transformation. Based on our groundwork for framing *photogénie* through Malick's rhythmic editing and juxtaposing close-ups, *Knight of Cups* can be reinterpreted and gauged via its Impressionist aesthetic strategies.

The film follows Hollywood screenwriter Rick (Christian Bale) and the emotional toil of his tumultuous, bacchanalian lifestyle. Malick's narrative frequently shifts in time and space between fragmented scenes and this echoes Epstein's notions of photogenic mobility through non-linear editing (OCCP, 315-316). Rick repeatedly indulges in sexual exploits, drugs and garish parties. He also deals with existential concerns about his lifestyle and lack of personal fulfilment.¹² The film consists of brief vignettes and story fragments. These are loosely connected by eight sections, each of which is titled by a Tarot card, such as "The High Priestess" or "The Hanged Man." Each card correlates to one of Rick's romantic interests or family members. Rick is notionally the "Knight of Cups," a figure the Tarot characterises as romantic, idealistic and artistic. However, the Knight is also linked to boredom. His impetuous impulses deliver him from noble pursuits, as he is easily distracted and tempted. Many of the film's vignettes involve romantic trysts with various women. Some of Rick's affairs are marked by sensual or carnal indulgence, while others entail more sincere romantic endeavours. Except for the final section "Freedom," each of Rick's relationships fail in terms of commitment, romantic fulfilment and/or spiritual realization.

¹² *Knight of Cups*' narrative is distilled, in part, from the allegories present within Apostle Thomas' *Hymn of the Pearl* and John Bunyan's religious novel *The Pilgrim's Progress*, as expressed in his father's voiceovers.

Despite its themed sections, *Knight of Cups* is challenging to comprehend on a first viewing because Malick does not employ the clear exposition associated with classical narration. In the first five minutes, for example, there are no character introductions or dialogue, while we see more than a dozen locations as Rick parties, experiences an earthquake and wanders around studio backlots. The film also frequently withholds specific narrative details about Rick's interactions. When combined with the episodic structure, this makes it difficult to keep track of where, how or why relationships begin or end. Rick's restlessness is thus paralleled by the anecdotal, tangential and meandering narrative. This impression is alluded to in an early voiceover by his father Joseph (Brian Dennehy). He offers: "My son. You're just like I am. Can't figure your life out? Can't put the pieces together? Just like me. A pilgrim on this earth. A stranger. Fragments...pieces...of a man." The voiceover overlays a sequence of low-angle shots of the L.A. skyline at dusk, in which we see Rick ambling across a shadowed rooftop, driving down a freeway and returning alone to an empty flat.

The fragmentary quality of the narrative is reinforced throughout the film by Malick's visual style. Malick's camerawork includes frequent use of tracking shots and this non-static quality of the cinematography instils a sense of instability, as the camera perpetually roves and wanders along with the characters. Furthermore, the camera often pulls-out and then pushes-in creating close-ups. The film regularly employs these tight framings when characters are reflecting on the weight of their (indulgent) actions and how this impacts them emotionally. In addition to the wandering and kinetic quality of the camerawork, the editing is relatively quick, even by contemporary standards. According to the *Cinematics* database, it has an average shot length (ASL) of two seconds.¹³ These stylistic framings and brisk cuts emphasize notions of gesture, in terms of countenance and the elliptical quality of editing. These images and close-ups also seem to be on cusp of something transformative, connoting an interior, hidden life for the characters.

Malick's stylistic strategies in *Knight of Cups* can be understood as an example of what David

¹³ <http://www.cinematics.lv/database.php>

Bordwell refers to as “intensified continuity.” Bordwell argues that contemporary American movies are characterised by four stylistic trends: faster cutting, the use of short and long lenses, tight framings and a free-ranging camera (IC, 16-21). *Knight of Cups*’ ASL is faster than the 3-6 second ASLs Bordwell associates with intensified continuity (IC, 16-17). This, together with its frequent camera movements, gives the film its kinetic qualities: it seems on the move. As Bordwell states, “Rapid editing obliges the viewer to assemble discrete pieces, and it sets a commanding pace: look away and you might miss a key point [...] even ordinary scenes are heightened to compel attention and sharpen emotional resonance” (IC, 24). Thus, the general pace of elliptical images in *Knight of Cups* exhibits a spontaneous, impressionistic quality of life. Through this style, Malick’s film form illustrates a sense of interiority for his characters as these intensified visual techniques relate to their turbulent, internal feelings.

Malick’s style works in conjunction with the fragmented narrative to create something like a torrential or stream-of-consciousness experience for the viewer. The inclusion of a liberal amount of amateur video footage further adds to the film’s spontaneity. Brody interprets the disparate nature of the film in terms of memory: “*Knight of Cups* is Rick’s act of remembering, and it follows the strange double logic of memory –the triggering efforts of wilful thought and free-flowing associations of the unconscious mind.” This interpretation accounts for the visual quality of *Knight of Cups* as Rick’s desire for internal direction implores an “acceptance of fragments –of incidents, experiences, episodes, impressions –from which their own unifying principle will arise” (Brody). Lubezki also describes his approach to shooting as trying to create a feeling of memory for Rick, as Malick was endeavouring to “capture a certain emotion” through the film’s structural fragmentation and imperfection (Cheng).

The itinerant formal dimensions of *Knight of Cups* thus parallel Rick’s listless emotional status as he struggles to find fulfilment. We feel this sense of restlessness and dissatisfaction in the early section “Moon” which deals with the brief affair of Rick and Della (Imogen Poots) as they amble, desire and confront each other in a motley of short scenes. It is unclear exactly where the two meet, as non-linear editing shows them (first) conversing in both a restaurant and a talent

agency. From there Malick shows them in an array of different motels, vacant parking lots and an aquarium. Rick and Della are often framed in close-ups and the camera will regularly pull out and push-in for this tight framing. An example of this occurs when Della paces back and forth atop an open city garage, while declaring to Rick her simmering disdain for him: “I, think, you’re weak.” Malick uses this device to highlight her expression and underlying negative feelings towards Rick. Moreover, the unsettled nature of the non-linear narrative and techniques of intensified continuity mirror their unstable relationship, which soon falls apart, as Della says to Rick: “You don’t want love. You want a love experience.” The sporadic elision of time and space in Malick’s montage style also reinforces the sense of propulsion and movement indicative of *photogénie*. To reiterate Epstein: “Photogenic mobility is a mobility in a space-time system” (OCCP, 316). The temporal editing movement here organizes *Knight of Cups* in an intensified, non-linear fashion of prolonged searching and weightlessness, as Malick formulates a method of emotionally charged montage that is the most rhythmically and self-consciously impulsive in his career thus far. Through formal devices that relate to intensified continuity, Malick style can be further interpreted through its photogenic qualities.

The photogenic quality of *Knight of Cups* can also be discerned in Malick’s use of close-ups. The film contains numerous close-ups that both complicate and reveal insights into the characters’ internal states. This comes across in a flashback during the “Judgement” section. Here, Rick and his former wife Nancy (Cate Blanchett) share a close-up frame showing them next to a glass window in their old home, where they silently withhold the internal conflicts between them. Her eyes lock onto him, waiting for a response, but Rick furtively avoids her gaze. The moment is not expanded narratively, and the audience is not privy to the content of their conversation, but Malick does focus intently on their conflicted facial gestures and thus intensifies the drama of their tumultuous relationship. This mutual close-up is further postured around a montage of the couple both arguing and cavorting, exemplifying their impulsive behaviours along with the rapid editing. These stylistic features in *Knight of Cups* understandably evidence Epstein’s theoretical conceits. He writes: “The close-up is an intensifying agent [...] The cinematic feeling is therefore particularly intense. More than anything, the close-up releases it” (JEM, 239-240). Earlier in the first chapter, I mention Epstein’s expression of the facial preamble, which is registered as a

close-up, wherein the simmering physical motions of a characters' expressions detail an unspoken interior sensibly as a window into their subjectivity. These gestural qualities of close-ups aid us in further unpacking key emotional moments such as this, and their photogenic qualities.

As Malick frames his close-ups within a network of brisk editing and montage imagery, he facilitates non-causal, associative rhythms as generators of emotional immediacy. Keller writes on behalf of Epstein's use of accelerated montage and how its visual excesses serve the characters and the narrative (GPEN). Wall-Romana also notes that *photogénie* entails a hyperactivity, which we can position within associative montages (29). In Malick's impulsive narrative style, we can distil photogenic movement based on a gestural state or preamble of emotional fluctuation, which is constantly renewed in the film's complex elision of time and place. Important close-ups will punctuate the rapid cutting, and Malick's camera will often push in on characters' faces to further signal these dramatic moments of personal reflection and realisation. Through this sense of becoming for his characters (implicitly a nebulous array of cathartic, personal transformations) Malick remains elusive in disclosing direct answers of their psychological journeys. As an example, this comes across in a close-up of Rick visibly crying during the middle of the "Judgement" section as his countenance expresses regret for his neglected relationship with Nancy. In a brief respite from the elliptical cutting, the camera pushes in on Rick and follows him as he ambles through an empty room. His veins strain along his neck and cheek as he holds back tears. While Rick may not yet be ready to fully change his wandering attitudes, this moment does signal a realisation of the negative effects of his relationship(s). Through Malick's episodic narration and rapid editing, the couples' lives amount to a series of fleeting experiences that are inherently unstable. Malick magnifies a subjective interest by having the formal techniques of the film correlate to its content of emphasizing interiority. This cinematic approach also echoes Epstein's aesthetic aspirations regarding fully realized photogenic imagery, and he focuses on the tension between mobility and stillness as a point of reflection (GPEN). An aesthetic tension is evident in this photogenic instance for Rick and reoccurs at various points throughout the film. Such acute attention towards internal expressivity (while remaining paradoxically opaque) nurtures a curious aesthetic design which invites a contemplative, rhetorical approach to better unpacking Malick's film(s).

As the episodic narrative continues through passing scenes, locations and characters, the ephemeral and kinetic quality of *Knight of Cups* issues other photogenic instances, such as the dramatic anecdotes and moments of *photogénie* involving Elizabeth (Natalie Portman). Rick's experiences with Elizabeth compose the "Death" section of the film. Here, in the latter half of *Knight of Cups*, Rick appears to begin considering more of the effects of his lifestyle and its negative impacts. This section comes shortly after the Vegas party scenes of "The High Priestess" which highlight a few close-ups of Rick in a neon-lit club, where he ogles various women. While swept up in the revelry of this milieu, his countenance also shows clear expressions of exhaustion, even dejection. The activities of the club, executed through dancing and rapid cutting, create layers of performance and editing movement to frame Rick's photogenic close-ups. These close-ups are measured in only a few seconds, which Epstein declares is necessary for exhibiting *photogénie* (JEM, 236). As the story transitions into "Death" a mysterious voiceover asks of Rick: "Are you afraid?"¹⁴ Rick's affair with the married Elizabeth initially starts off promising, despite her infidelity to her husband. She expresses love for Rick, while he asks of himself via voiceover: "Have I found you? Can it be?" Rick's performance is even more outwardly positive during a sequence where the couple visits the beach, as he smiles and swims in the ocean. However, Elizabeth's facial gestures begin to contrast Rick's, as split second close-ups and rapid push-ins of the camera show feelings of nervousness for her.

The emphasis of gesture measured in performances and in the gestural quality of elliptical scenes is useful for gauging these dramatic anecdotes and potential moments of *photogénie*. While Malick's close-ups denote brief pauses from the editing, Epstein claims that "I have never understood motionless close-ups. They sacrifice their essence, which is movement" (JEM, 236). Therefore, this editing movement through an ephemeral collection of scenes conveys impressions of gestures and feelings for Rick and Elizabeth as their relationship continues. There is a sense of ebb and flow to their physical behaviours around each other, which is visually illustrated by the pushing in and pulling out of the camera. Serious personal issues arise as we

¹⁴ This refers to Isabel, who will appear later.

become privy to the fact the Elizabeth became pregnant and then had an abortion, as she was unsure of the child's father. This takes a heavy toll on her which is manifested through camera movement that pushes in during a few close-ups of her, as she explains to Rick their situation. Her dialogue floats in between these brief moments in a non-linear manner, although the dramatic meaning of this incident is conveyed through collective cinematography, editing and framing. The section ends with a key close-up of Rick wandering through the desert. His face simmers with emotion as his neck flushes, skin creases and eyes well up with tears while he reflects on the effects of their relationship. The moment is not explained narratively, but it implies a feeling, which is conveyed through photogenic interests that centre on the mobility of the editing collocated with the stillness of the emphasized close-up (GPEN). This instance of *photogénie* signals change for Rick, who ponders the need for genuine love, forgiveness and redemption going forward. These themes inform most of the personal interactions which ensue for the rest of the film as Rick appears to reconcile with his family and finds hope in a new love interest.

The last section of *Knight of Cups* marks a period of transformation for Rick. This final section follows him and the peripheral, mysterious Isabel (Isabel Lucas). We do not know how they met. While Rick's previous love affairs have ended in either tragedy or separation, there seems to be hope in this concluding love interest, if only because the "Freedom" title hints that Rick will be released from his cycle of affairs and personal questioning. Until this point, Isabel has appeared only briefly at discrete moments throughout the film in what we understand retrospectively as flash-forwards. In turn, this reinforces our awareness of a non-linear narrative structure and thus positions many of the splintered scenes in *Knight of Cups* as memory fragments. A.A. Dowd writes that the free-associative quality of the film presents the narrative as a "memory-collage of a story," and this further points to fragmentation as a lens through which to experience character subjectivity. As a result, Joseph's voiceover exhortations for Rick to "Remember" become even more poignant. As Batcho argues: "Rick's disassociating—a disassociation that is an act—is dilated to the point where love becomes a series of losses that can barely be felt" (138). Batcho adds that within a narrative of recollection, Rick's "memories are so broken and drug-addled that he cannot find himself within his re-imaginings" (138). Thus, the "Freedom" section indicates

that Rick is moving beyond his tumultuous experiences and into a period of life that is promising and emotionally fulfilling.

In a key moment during this section, there is a punctuated, photogenic close-up of Rick with a field of wind turbines spinning over his shoulder [Figure 6]. Framed in the twilight desert landscape, this brief image harbours a wealth of photogenic interest. The physical machinery and fast cutting provide a cumulative sense of movement for the viewer. While housed in a framework of photogenic mobility through non-linear editing, the transformative quality of this moment is also signalled by Joseph's encouraging voiceover, imploring Rick to find the happiness he once knew in himself, as well as elliptical scenes with Isabel and memories of Nancy which ensue in the following images. Malick's close-up shows Rick facing downward, with eyes closed and a pensive expression on his face. He looks less perturbed than before and appears to be regaining a sense of peace within himself. His silent visage and the quick editing which surrounds this brief close-up contributes to an interior movement through formal techniques that outline an essence of photogenic mobility. Furthermore, Rick's revelatory closeup is utilised as a "conduit for complex expression" and this instance of *photogénie* functions as a turning point for Rick, as he reconciles with his father (this occurs through fragmented scenes just before this) and enters a fulfilling relationship with Isabel (DC, 91). The formal movement reinforces our impressions of Rick's conflicted and emotionally turbulent life as the titular Knight of Cups. Simultaneously, it gestures towards his new beginning. The close-up of Rick is onscreen for only a few seconds before the rapid cutting resumes. In this brief moment, there is a photogenic tension between stillness and motion, echoing Epstein's propensity for juxtaposing close-ups with accelerated cutting (GPEN). In its brevity, this accelerated image is consistent with *photogénie*'s characteristic movement via the film's editing strategies which emphasize kinetic movement and short close-ups as pauses to signal crucial moments of aesthetic interest and interiority. Moreover, this moment also echoes similar images evidenced in the carousel sequence of *Coeur Fidèle*, as well as Marina's fairground experiences in *To the Wonder*.



Fig 6. *Photogénie* issued through close-ups and rapid cutting illustrate the interior weightlessness and personal transformation for Rick (Christian Bale) in *Knight of Cups*.

After this moment of *photogénie* the formal techniques of the film begin to alter, as Rick settles into a new way of life. “Freedom” presents *Knight of Cups*’ denouement with scenes of Rick and Isabel in a desert (oasis) home. At this point, the shots lengthen and the flux of imagery begins to resolve. As the concluding love interest of Rick (while he distances himself from his previous problematic lifestyle) Isabel arrives as a strange character in the narrative. Her face is rarely visible from a frontal vantage point, close-ups often focus instead on the back of her head and when she *is* onscreen, usually she is physically moving and running/twirling/dancing past the edges of the frame. While oddly distant, in ways where other characters were not, Isabel is surely distinct from the other women in Rick’s life. She is almost an ethereal figure and the lack of facial close-ups which have commonly emphasized the turmoil in the lives of Rick’s prior paramours distinguishes her as separated from this type of emotion. While not registered through tight framings which surround the other characters, it is suggested that Isabel is a gentle and benign figure, and her sequences with Rick in their new home (as well as an insert of a baby crawling on a sunlit deck) augur that Rick has moved past internal *ennui* and has finally found fulfilment in his life. The final images of *Knight of Cups* show GoPro footage Rick swimming

underwater, a camera tracking through empty desert spaces at magic hour, tracking through Rick's empty flat, and finally Rick leaving L.A. and driving into the desert at dusk. A closing voice-over from Rick implores of himself to "Begin," and the quiet scenes which conclude *Knight of Cups* allude to this sense of transcendence for Rick.

A photogenic framework is suitable in gauging the interiorities of Malick's characters, with Rick at the centre. Impressions, memory fragments and episodic flashpoints of his life are detailed through an intensified continuity style which uses a free-ranging camera, close framings and rapid editing to provide visual expressions of Rick's internal feelings through an aesthetic tension of movement and stasis. Moreover, instances of *photogénie* exist throughout *Knight of Cups* and issue ephemeral moments of intense, personal interest, wherein characters reflect on their interior conditions. By focusing on facial gestures through close-ups, Malick's photogenic techniques register the subjectivity of Rick and the other characters, as they experience an underlying emotional movement in response to their chaotic lifestyles. Additionally, Malick's inclination for complicated aesthetics of non-linearity, and what Blasi refers to as "entanglement" echo a lack of causality in our initial understanding of Rick's nebulous, entangled affairs, which leave him intrinsically unmoored (22-28). The kinetic quality of *Knight of Cups*' non-linear narrative provides visual illustrations that associate with characters, and Malick's close-ups furnish gestures of magnified, interiority which Epstein accounts for in his passionate appeal for a heightened aesthetic quality in cinema (JEM, 235-240). Thus, the audience feels the meandering, jumbled quality of the narrative as we feel these same qualities as Rick. It is only at the close of *Knight of Cups* where the flux of the film is toned down and Rick experiences a narratively oblique transition away from his indulgent, dissatisfied way of living. Following his close-up near the wind turbine, this particular moment of *photogénie* gestures towards a sense of calm within Rick, which carries him to new beginnings.

Having dealt with these films in terms of *photogénie* I will now turn my attention towards *The Tree of Life* and *Song to Song*. Through a critical approach concerning French Impressionist techniques and aesthetic strategies, I will unpack these texts and focus primarily on the concluding film of the Weightless trilogy.

Chapter 3: Impressionist Aesthetics in *The Tree of Life* and *Song to Song*

This final chapter will apply the conceptual frameworks of *photogénie* and pure cinema to Malick's films *The Tree of Life*¹⁵ and *Song to Song*, which is the final entry in the Weightless trilogy. While *TToL* was praised critically, *Song to Song* had a largely negative reception and has received little scholarly attention. Despite their apparent differences, they make for a useful comparison because both can be interpreted using an Impressionist approach. Both films have elliptical narratives whose structures, visual style and editing strategies can be read as examples of pure cinema. They also contain several instances of *photogénie* that are evident in close-ups. The fragmented narrative structures of the films resemble a stream-of-consciousness or the flow of memory. Stylistically, they employ the camerawork and editing rhythms associated with intensified continuity. Both films deal with the interior lives of the characters, particularly as they grapple with forgiveness. Interestingly, they both quote other films conspicuously. Given that *TToL* runs five hours in its extended version and *Song to Song* has a mercurial quality that makes it challenging to grasp, I will focus on key aspects of each text, rather than attempting a comprehensive reading of them.

Impressionist Tendencies in *The Tree of Life*

The Tree of Life concerns the O'Brien family and has a complicated narrative structure. The story jumps between multiple time periods. The main part of the film takes place in the 1950s in Smithville, Texas, but we also see scenes of Mrs. O'Brien's childhood, scenes in the 1960s when the family learns of the death of R.L. (Laramie Eppler), one of the sons, and sequences set in the 2000s involving the eldest son Jack (played by Sean Penn and Hunter McCracken respectively). The narrative is fragmentary and entails numerous flashbacks. Russell J.A. Kilbourn argues that the film unfolds as a manifold flashback, and that within the world of the film the concept of the Tree of Life serves as a metaphor for memory. As Batcho suggests, "One remembers in fragments, short scenes, snippets of spoken phrases brief interludes" (126). This has its corollary in the form the *TToL* takes. According to Kilbourn, "the transcendence of time and memory can

¹⁵ Hereafter referred to as *TToL*.

only be shown through their visual representation –through flashback, associative editing, and a discontinuous narrative logic” (VOW, 37-39).

Malick’s approach to memory in *TToL* can be situated within a French Impressionist framework. Dulac said about memory:

The inner life made perceptible by images is, with movement, the entire art of cinema [...] Movement, inner life. These two terms, moreover, are not at all incompatible. What is more mobile than our psychological life with its reactions, its manifold impressions, its sudden movements, its dreams, its memories? The cinema is marvelously equipped to express these manifestations of our thinking, our emotions, our memories (ETC, 309-310).

As such, one finds favourable correlation between the subjective, memory aesthetics of *TToL* and Dulac’s innate interests in utilizing pure cinema techniques to reveal the impressions and memories of an interior life. The implicit expressivity of subjective experiences binds these Impressionist strategies. Malick’s stream-of-consciousness or narrative montage construction emphasizes fragments and ellipses through pure cinema techniques to visualize the inner expressivity of the O’Briens. Cinema tools such as close-ups, montage, light and movement within the frame are used through which to explore emotions and subjective insights for the characters. Many of these formal cinematic devices are apparent in Jack’s flashbacks of his childhood with his brothers and parents, as he plays, fights and is fundamentally shaped by his youthful experiences. As Batcho contends, “Jack’s memory-recollection-imaginings” are not a closed circuit of linear narration but are more like abstractions that encourage sensations over logical responses (121-126).

The Tree of Life also includes a range of non-narrative material, most notably the long “creation” sequence that depicts the birth of the cosmos and early life on Earth.¹⁶ Thus, the film shifts between grandiose visual passages and the family’s experiences. Laurent Bouzereau regards

¹⁶ This sequence lasts for about twenty minutes.

these parallel passages in the film as a “macrocosm of all, pared with the microcosm of a single family,” while John Landreville writes that *TToL* provides a “nondifferentiation between heterogeneous registers of existence, placing human and cosmic scales of affect in the same continuum” (106).¹⁷ These concerns are configured through various visual strategies that can be construed as examples of pure cinema, such as the use of light, fluid camerawork and fast cutting. Additionally, several important close-ups can be regarded as examples of *photogénie*, through their tight framings and gestural qualities, that punctuate what is often a dynamic and kinetic film. These Impressionist strategies find an expressive, emotional correlation with the characters, whose lives are in a state of flux.

Indeed, the film begins by juxtaposing abstraction with important narrative information and a key thematic concern about grace and forgiveness. The opening image of *TToL* is one of emptiness awakening to essence. The film begins with a flickering source of light, which gently moves in polychromatic shapes. Malick’s introduction of this abstract image is aesthetically provocative in its pure cinema features. The image itself is an excerpt from Thomas Wilfred’s *Opus 161* (1965-1966). Wilfred designates this visual light art as “*lumia*,” and Malick uses the *lumia* to signify the Big Bang. *Opus 161* also provides an important aesthetic function because it connotes eruption, movement and life. While the Impressionists prized the qualities of light as artistically expressive through its mobile phenomena, and to provide a sense of interior enrichment for subjects and spectators alike, Malick refashions our understanding of light to exemplify the cosmological source of all living things. As the *lumia* flames onscreen, light evokes its earliest moments and positions its very phenomena and essence as the nucleus of life. As Dulac writes in 1925: “*Le cinéma est l’art du mouvement et de la lumière*” (LMC, 107).¹⁸ The *lumia* image also evidences Dulac’s ideal conception of a pure cinema, “empty of incident and character, filled with suggestion and sensation” (LMC, 117).

The *lumia* is followed by a montage that contains snippets of Mrs. O’Brien (Jessica Chastain) as a child and shots of her husband and sons set in the 1950s (which we subsequently understand

¹⁷ n.p. in Bouzereau.

¹⁸ “Cinema is the art of movement and light.”

are memories). As in Malick's earlier films, Mrs. O'Brien is initially immersed within a natural environment, as we see farm animals, sunlight and sunflowers.¹⁹ This is followed by shots of the family playing in the yard and sitting at the dining room table. These sketches of family history are deftly relayed through the camera as it moves towards and swirls around them in a manner consistent with both intensified continuity and pure cinema. The pacing is reasonably measured, resonating with the apparently harmonious patterns of family life. During these sequences, we hear a voiceover of the older Mrs. O'Brien as she delivers the film's thematic mantra: "The nuns taught us there were two ways through life –the way of nature and the way of grace." Nature signifies aggression, competition and superficial success, while grace is associated with acceptance and forgiveness (the latter is often connected with skyward images of light).

However, despite the tranquil mood, the opening sequences contain two moments that hint at troubles the family experiences during the 1950s, when much of the film takes place. They both point to the elegiac tone of the film and the way Malick uses brief pauses in his work to convey the inner dimensions of his characters.²⁰ One such instance shows a medium close-up of Mrs. O'Brien seated at the dinner table with the family. Her image and exclusive framing is a pause from the activities of play, roving camera and brisk cutting which surround this moment, as her expression appears restful and contemplative. The voice of Mr. O'Brien (Brad Pitt) can be heard delivering a prayer, however, Mrs. O'Brien's voiceover also overlays this as she contemplates the way of nature. Her downcast gaze and hesitant smile seem to suggest that qualities of nature may portend hardship for the family. This relates to Epstein's idea that the "photogenic is conjugated in the future and imperative" as this important close-up signals present feelings for Mrs. O'Brien that gesture towards future concerns (JEM, 236).

Malick further gestures towards the eventual death of R.L. near the end of these opening sequences. Like Dulac, Malick implements certain framings, light, movement and duration (i.e. cutting) to "create drama enacted through purely visual elements" (LMC, 161). The camera swirls around Mrs. O'Brien during the magic hour as the family plays in the yard. Framed in a

¹⁹ The sunflowers are a reference to Dovzhenko's *Earth*; I discuss this below.

²⁰ John Tavener's "Funeral Canticle" also plays during these sequences, ushering a mournful mood.

medium close-up, she shoots a concerned look offscreen towards her right and this is matched by a brief tracking shot of R.L. walking away before turning to look over his shoulder. This moment subtly augurs his eventual passing and shapes the core emotional concerns of the film which deal with grief, acceptance and forgiveness. Two scenes of a gushing waterfall and a tracking push-in of the symbolic “Tree of Life” planted in their yard (moving skyward towards the evening sun) end the sequence which then shifts into the 1960s time period. A courier delivers to Mrs. O’Brien the news of R.L.’s death. Issues of intensified continuity through jump-cutting and camera push-ins (and pull-outs) show medium close-ups of her reacting to the dreadful news. Her lips tremble, eyes search the room, neck strains and nose wrinkles in response, and as she begins to cry out in anguish the scene abruptly cuts to Mr. O’Brien receiving and reacting to the news with similar facial gestures. Like his wife, Mr. O’Brien couches over and heaves, while the camera roves and hovers over him. The magic hour sun fading into the horizon shares in this frame, and Malick appears to indicate that the ephemeral quality of light mirrors an ephemeral quality of life. Through magnified framing, camera movement and cutting, Malick uses pure cinematic techniques to frame this important photogenic moment for Mrs. O’Brien (ETC, 306).

The 1960s passage closes on another image of the *lunia*, leading into a barrage of rapid, blurred urban imagery and foreshadowed scenes of elder Jack in an abstract, desert locale. Much like Rick wandering through the desert in *Knight of Cups*, Jack’s activities of ambling through the desert serve a more allegorical, rather than literal function, as these scenes intermittently punctuate the film and do not causally relate to any of the other narrative settings. The narrative then skips ahead to the late-2000s with a medium close-up of Jack, as he rises from bed in an emotional stupor. The camera pushes-in and pulls-out, moving unsteadily with Jack as a visual technique that aligns the formal qualities of the film to his interior feelings. After fully getting up he lights a candle for the anniversary of R.L.’s passing and recalls his experiences as a child. “I see the child I was” plays via voiceover as rhythmically fractured imagery, and the tracking movements of the Steadicam present kinetic images of Jack and his brothers in the 1950s running, laughing and lounging around. Lubezki’s camera often orbits the boys, sweeping in for a close-up, while the fading evening sun casts light over their shoulders or behind the neighbourhood foliage. These scenes are memories for him which correlate with the playful flux

of life in the 1950s, and how the offscreen death of his brother affects and disrupts his emotional stability in the present. This memory montage uses transient natural light, kinetic camerawork and rapid editing to relay a rush of interior turmoil as Jack's reflects on joyful moments of his past, which he struggles to reconcile with his current feelings of regret and mourning.

In both Dulac's works and *TToL*, one finds a common interest in visually articulated character expressions. Sarah Keller notes the key Impressionist tenet is an aesthetic interest in the subjective, introspective states of characters (OH, 160). Moreover, Dulac's preference for silent expression, close-ups, isolated gestures, image movement (within and between frames) and its cumulative, associative qualities are all expressive features evident in *TToL* (ETC, 305-314). Jack's memories are similar to Mrs. O'Brien's in terms of content and form. However, his memories are more intensified, given his complicated emotional attachments which focus on both the joys and pains of growing up. The 1950s scenes often involve close-ups of the boys, privileging the activities of the family in Jack's recollections. His memories and experiences are formed by tight framings, movement through camerawork and faster editing. Further evidence of intensified continuity and photogenic mobility exhibited throughout the *Weightless* trilogy films is more apparent in the contemporary scenes with Jack. This more inflamed visual method represents his emotional disorientation, primarily through faster cutting.

The scenes set in the 2000s contain non-linear sequences of Jack wandering around a lavish architectural firm in Houston. These are interpolated with splintered memories of the 1950s. Between these various time periods, the film continues to make use of tight framings, camera push-ins and skyward attention to overhead natural light. The use of natural light emphasizes the possibility of grace. In the present, there are snatches of background narrative chatter between various office workers, although dialogue is often drowned out by ambient noise, as scenes meander from one to another. This echoes Dulac's contention that cinematic techniques should downplay speech and allow the rhythmic quality of the images to become "the sole source of emotion" (ETC, 307). These formal features generate a listless unsettled quality, as Jack deals with the emotional repercussions of family death and a need for reconciliation and forgiveness. Furthermore, Malick shows more footage of Jack in the desert landscape. Retrospectively, we

know these to be flash-forwards of his journey near the end of the film towards an ethereal plain where he comes to embrace the way of grace and means of forgiveness, and thus eventual state of transcendence.

After being introduced to the older Jack in the 2000s, another close-up of a grieving 1960s Mrs. O'Brien signals the start of the cosmobiogenesis sequence, which we can read in terms of *photogénie* and pure cinema. Mrs. O'Brien's eyes are fixed skyward as she strolls through a forest. Tears stain her cheeks and the redness around her eyes contrasts with their natural green colour. This is an instance of *photogénie* for her as the tight framing and punctuated moment takes a pause from the previous editing rhythms. As she closes her eyes, the screen goes black and the *lumia* reappears. This image of light personifies the essence of grace as she implores via voiceover: "Lord. Why? Where were you?" The abstract cosmobiogenesis sequence then begins, showing the development of life on a macro scale. Zbigniew Preisner's "Lacrimosa" plays in the background as images of cosmic clouds, newly formed stars and planets, volcanic eruptions, rushing water and the evolving life on Earth irrupt into the frames. Much like the polychromatic movements evident in the phenomena of the *lumia*, Malick shows a collection of billowing clouds outlined by light from newly formed stars, as well as bubbling and steaming water, and underwater skyward framings to exhibit pure cinema's "art of movement and [...] visual rhythms of life and the imagination" (AOIC, 396).

In this famed sequence, abstract/subjectless images of pure light and movement rely exclusively on pure cinema techniques which provide meaningful reflections of character's feelings and emotions (AOIC, 394-395). They reflect Mrs. O'Brien's mourning and the implications of her feelings contextualize these more abstract images of the film that appear ostensibly divorced from the O'Brien narrative. Tracking shots and push-ins provide further cinematic movement once the sequence shifts away from space and focuses on life on Earth; as the camera follows various microbial life, dinosaurs and sea creatures while also showing the camera gliding over natural terrains. Soon these images return to scenes of the O'Brien family, before and after the births of the boys. As Malick covers this macrocosm of evolving life in this extended sequence,

he focuses chiefly on issues of pure cinematic movement through elliptical editing, light reflected on phenomena such as floating clouds, flora, eruptions of dust, streaming water and how the aesthetic qualities of these rhythms and movements correlate to Mrs. O'Brien's mournful enquiry about the nature of her son's death. Moreover, the techniques and features of pure cinema evident here attribute to the closing lines of Dulac's essay "Aesthetic, Obstacles, Integral *Cinégraphie*" as she contends that cinema "springs from the very essence of the universe: movement" (397).

Following the extended creation sequence, *TToL* enters the 1950s setting for most of the film. Images of the planetary solar system overlay Mrs. O'Brien's voiceover: "Light of my life. I search for you. I hope. My child." The elder Jack reflects upon his recognition of grace, embodied in his mother, as anecdotes of the young O'Brien couple are shown segueing to Mrs. O'Brien's pregnancy. Abstract images then arise of an angelic figure leading children dressed in white through a forest and of a toddler swimming in an underwater room. A child swims through a submerged bedroom door, towards the surface light, paralleling Jack's physical birth through shot associations. Close-ups of an infant Jack open a montage of disparate scenes showing the births of the other brothers and their pre-adolescent life. The O'Brien sons are frequently framed in photogenic close-ups, natural lighting and elliptical movement encased in a fast rhythmic cutting which borders on an overarching montage structure. These mobile techniques indicate Dulac's assertion that through movement, "The cinema is marvelously equipped to express these manifestations of our thinking, our emotions, our memories" (ETC, 310). For Jack, some of these memories are joyful, such as when the boys playfully chase their mother after discovering that their father has left town on business. In this instance, a montage of spirited activities show tracking shots of the boys running through the household and around the yard, and more close-ups of them smiling and laughing. Mrs. O'Brien joins in their revelry as the family enjoys a respite from the gruff parental style of Mr. O'Brien; as he often challenges and criticizes the boys, in order to enforce his way of nature approach to raising them. Despite lively passages such as this, not all memories are happy ones for Jack.

As he gets older, Jack's demeanour shifts from innocence to indignation as he combats the rough, critical parenting of his father and jealousy towards his younger brothers. The way of nature eclipses the way of grace, as a punitive father and harsh realities erode Jack's nascent perception of grace and innocence. Trouble in school, a lack of confidence, bullying and guilt over his delinquency place him in at an existential crossroads, as he yearns to absolve his mean spiritedness and to return to the bliss of early youth. Examples of this include when Jack breaks into a neighbour's house to steal a woman's slip, which he later (self-consciously) tosses into the river, and especially after he shoots R.L. in the finger with a BB gun. Following these episodes, close-ups of Jack disclose a profound sense of remorse for his clandestine activities and the bullying of his brothers. While he endeavours to conceal his emotions in these moments, his countenance betrays flushed cheeks, simmering tears and a distant gaze that appears to worry about what the absence of forgiveness may entail. Despite Jack's occasional misgivings about himself and his bad behaviour, R.L.'s acceptance of Jack's apology indicates that forgiveness and grace are always possible avenues of living a higher quality of life. Malick evidences these interior stirrings, this "private theatre of consciousness," through reflective voiceover and montages (Flaxman, 90). Magic hour cinematography is often used in these sequences. This visualizes grace and redemption, while continuing to stress the aesthetic importance of light and transience within each elliptical moment [Figure 7].



Fig 7. Photogenic mobility in light, movement and montage with Jack (Hunter McCracken) in *The Tree of Life*.

Transcendence and Forgiveness

As the 1950s narrative closes, Malick refocuses on the death of R.L. and its effects on the family in their later year. A dire need for consolation and forgiveness comes at the film's apotheosis, as in the 2000s Jack ascends a skyscraper elevator, entering an abstract desert locale. This is a psycho-graphic, allegorical exteriorization of his inner, emotional state. Serena Bramble and Matt Zoller Seitz describe this space as a "psychological gathering place."²¹ Jack first follows the angelic Guide (Jessica Fuselier) and then a vision of his younger self through the desert, passing through a door frame into an ethereal, oceanic plain. In reference to an early draft of the screenplay, Malick describes this location as not necessarily a physical place, but rather an exteriorization of the soul (Zocchi, 12). Kilbourn adds that this "this liminal eschatological place has a primarily psycho-allegorical function" (VOW, 41). This spiritual environment is an experiential gathering site across time and space, with various resurrected townsfolk and children from Jack's past. It connects all the narrative tributaries of *TToL* as Jack returns to his memories

²¹ n.p.

of the 1950s, embracing his childhood family and the grace of forgiveness. Swelling choir music and underwater ocean images surge onscreen creating an intense emotional atmosphere as the family reunites, framed in crepuscular close-ups [Figure 8]. The intense emotional drama of this sequence echoes Epstein's claim that "The close-up is drama in high gear" (JEM, 238). The concert of imagery features a blooming sapling and sauntering figures coming together and welcoming the theme of grace, as embodied through the magic hour light. Images of the cosmos, overhead seagulls and the eponymous Tree of Life from the family's childhood home weave together within this montage sequence. Memories of the O'Briens resurrect onscreen and through these experiences life is renewed for which to console the family and allow them to transcend their emotional burdens.



Fig 8. *Photogénie* functioning as a visual externalization of expressive interiority, reunion and forgiveness with Mrs. O'Brien (Jessica Chastain), Steve (Tye Sheridan) and R.L. (Laramie Eppler).

This section of the narrative is ripe with pure cinematic and photogenic material within the aesthetic content of the images through rhythmic montage, close-up framings and cumulative image movement. The ethereal sequence closes with images of the Guide, Mrs. O'Brien and her younger self framed in a series of close-ups, bathed in overhead sunlight, while the Guide

gesturally baptizes her with the light. With her hands cupping the orb of light, Mrs. O'Brien utters her final words ("I give him to you. I give you my son"), releasing the sun from above and washing out the screen in light [Figure 9]. Herein, light directly denotes themes of grace, while also functioning as a pure cinema technique of deep subjective interest, signalling her acceptance of R.L.'s death and the intra-forgiveness of the O'Briens. A slow pan downwards returns us to the setting of Earth, showing a breezy sunflower field at twilight. This image not only bookends the sunflowers showcased in the opening sequence, but it also provides a strong visual parallel to Aleksander Dovzhenko's silent film *Earth* (1930), which presents its own pastoral montage introduction [Figures 10 & 11]. The sunflowers in both films not only pose an interesting correlation to Malick's framing of the sun during the magic hour (and his allusion to *Earth*), but they are also innately connected to light, and thus, themes of grace and forgiveness. This relation is even more apparent, given Morrison and Schur's acknowledgement of *Earth*, which they deem as a clear inspiration for the nature sequences in *Days of Heaven*, as both films employ stylistic procedures of alternating sweeping camera shots with still, low angle close-ups (80). Moreover, Dulac even describes *Earth* as a pure cinema film (ACG, 47-48).



Fig 9. Mrs. O'Brien (Jessica Chastain) release her "son," transcending her grief.



Fig 10. A close-up of natural flora in Dovzhenko's *Earth*.



Fig 11. Corollary pastoral imagery emulated in *The Tree of Life*.

This earth-bound motion is repeated with Jack returning from above, as the skyscraper elevator courses downward back to Houston. Jack finds himself disoriented and emotionally impacted by his redemptive experience, as he stumbles back into the urban cityscape. A medium close-up

betrays a suggestive smile, whose minute gesture sends seismic waves of emotional catharsis.²² After he returns home, a skyward image of reflective buildings mirrors the sunny clouds above. A final magic hour image shows the Verranzo-Narrows Bridge eclipsing the sun and stretching into the horizon before the film cuts to a final scene of the *lumia* [Figure 12]. The bookended *lumia* embodies Dulac's claim that "The image can be as complex as an orchestration since it may be composed of combined movements of expression and light" (VAF, 34-35). This closing image rests on an emblematic signature of light, which acts as a visual-narrative coda, underscoring the aesthetic importance of light and mobility as manifestations of an interior life within an Impressionist perspective.

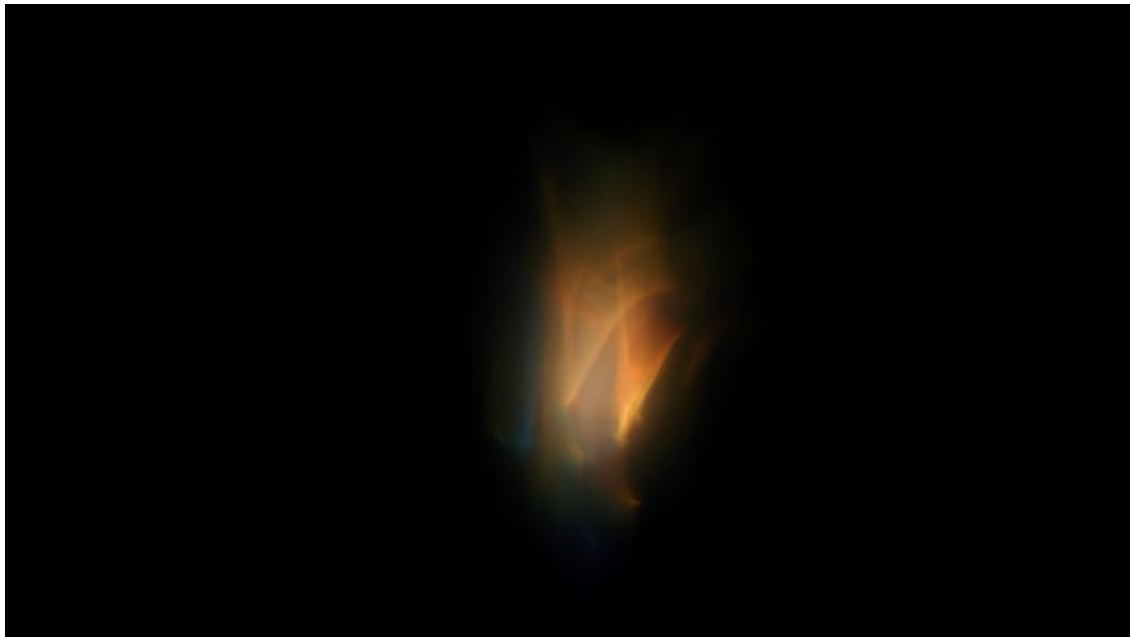


Fig 12. *Lumia Opus 161*, the prototypical, emblematic evocation of light in its thematic, aesthetic glory.

²² Epstein writes: "The cinematic feeling is therefore particularly intense. More than anything else, the close-up releases it."

Impressionism and Forgiveness in *Song to Song*

As the third and final entry in the Weightless trilogy, *Song to Song* is Malick's most narratively complex film to date. The film's combination of fragmented storytelling, narrative montages and intensified continuity style proved off-putting for many audience members, and in response, I contend that a French Impressionist approach to *Song to Song* can demonstrate the film's underlying aesthetic values. Both *TToL* and *Song to Song* deal with themes of grace and forgiveness that are exemplified in the use of light. While acknowledging the obvious religious dimension, light is also a component of pure cinema. The camera movement in many sequences and use of narrative montages gives the film a highly kinetic quality. Yet, this Impressionist style of filmmaking is further leavened by privileged moments of *photogénie*. The mix of pure cinema and *photogénie* allow Malick to explore the inner lives of his characters amidst their chaotic experiences and the possibility of moving towards an apotheosis of grace and forgiveness.

The critical response to *Song to Song* has been largely negative. While commending Malick as an "outside auteur" for his early work in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, Steve Rose writes that "as Malick's output has increased, the reverence has decreased [...] *Song to Song*, is another free-associative drama treading a now-familiar line between visionary rapture and feature-length perfume ad." Peter Travers asserts that Malick is in a creative funk within the Weightless trilogy. In his view, *Song to Song* underutilizes the talent of its actors and "hits all the wrong notes." In a particularly scathing review, Kevin Maher writes: "The modern films of Terrence Malick. Even as they reach for greatness, so do they teeter on the brink of idiocy [...] At best, the Malick method is a cinematic sacrament. At worst, it's a moronic, cringeworthy perfume commercial. Malick's new film, *Song to Song*, is his worst yet. An absolute shocker."

However, a few critical voices have stood by Malick's stylistic evolution. Manohla Dargis writes that Malick's films are defined by their visual fluidity and that he "began embracing narrative fragmentation years ago and this has increasingly characterized his films." Peter Bradshaw says, "there are some inspired visual flourishes and it is a film with its own weird stamina and momentum: sometimes exasperating, sometimes mesmeric." While critical of both *To the*

Wonder and *Knight of Cups*, Caryn James favours *Song to Song*, praising its energy, charisma and narrative similarities to *Days of Heaven*. More importantly, James notes the need to appraise Malick's recent work in more contemporary, experimental terms. Richard Brody, an advocate of the *Weightless* trilogy, argues that the film offers a "rapturous variety of visual experience [...] a conscious painterly boldness, a sort of cinematic Impressionism that locates an indelible force of light and detail in the stuff of daily life." Although he alludes to Impressionist paintings, he commends Malick's and Lubezki's creative approach to organizing "borderless images" and "soul-shuddering close-ups" in *Song to Song*'s formal construction, which I contend can be interpreted in terms of a French Impressionist critical framework.

As implied by its provisional title *Weightless*, *Song to Song* is adrift in a kinetic framework of filmmaking. The narrative is comprised of a series of anecdotes and fleeting, fragmented moments. It employs a similar intensified continuity style as *Knight of Cups*, although it pushes it further. As Blasi has argued, the *Weightless* trilogy employs "precise aesthetic techniques, such as the use of anamorphic lenses, fluid steady-cam movements, and discontinuous editing that favours temporal incongruities between shots" (23). This is indicative of a more complex and contemporary perspective (Blasi, 23). Malick uses this stylistic strategy to capture a series of disparate encounters and experiential moments. While participating in a panel after the film's initial screening at the SXSW Festival, he said:

We wanted to make it feel like there were bits and pieces of their lives [...] Can you just live in this world, moment to moment, song to song, kiss to kiss; and try to create these different moods for yourself, and go through the world without a self? Just sort of an eager will living from one desire to the next? [...] Where does that lead and what happens to you in a life of moments? (Damien).

Song to Song's dynamic filmmaking style encourages a sense of both transience and immediacy. This overarching correlation of continuous movement and subjectivity are consistent with Dulac, who asserted pure cinema as the "art of movement and of the visual rhythms of life and imagination" (AOIC, 396). Interestingly, the curator of the SXSW panel was fellow Austin filmmaker Richard Linklater who likened *Song to Song* to pure cinema. He claimed that the kind

of intuitive logic of feeling and emotional processing Malick was striving for was best suited to cinema because it was able to “capture something no other art form can” (Damien).

Impressionist Strategies in *Song to Song*

The basic narrative of *Song to Song* concerns the dubious relationships between aspiring musicians B.V. (Ryan Gosling) and Faye (Rooney Mara), and their volatile, philandering patron Cook (Michael Fassbender). Cook’s clout as an affluent producer in the Austin music scene lures B.V. and Faye to indulge in his hedonistic lifestyle and chauvinistic antics, to advance their respective dreams as aspiring musicians. Promiscuity, indulgence and mistrust soon dissolve the tentative partnership between the three, and they each eventually branch off and enjoy an array of other paramours: Cook with Rhonda (Natalie Portman); Faye with Zoey (Bérénice Marlohe); B.V. with Amanda (Cate Blanchett). Within this network of sexual trysts and satellite lovers, the romantic bond between B.V. and Faye remains the central interest of the narrative, as they experience personal, thematic registers of love, separation, grief and forgiveness. Like *Knight of Cups*, *Song to Song* presents a fairground of hedonistic play, which primarily stems from the sadistic behaviour of Cook. Much of the revelry and interior disquiet is similar, although Malick exchanges the party scenes of Los Angeles and Las Vegas for the backdrop of Austin music festivals. But unlike Rick, Cook is much less sympathetic of a central character. While Rick was self-indulgent and emotionally unmoored, he moves towards redemption by the film’s end. Cook, on the other hand, is aggressive, histrionic and deliberately exploitative. Although he has moments of doubt? Cook’s magnetic and savage personality is ultimately irredeemable. Zocchi notes that each character wants some form of freedom, with Cook exploiting those desires (18). His seductive nature and “corrupted bond[s]” in his unhealthy relationships with Rhonda and Faye, and his deceitful contract with B.V., strips these characters of their freedoms and their ability to authentically sing their own songs (Zocchi, 18). While Cook’s caustic persona is the fulcrum of much of the film’s bacchanalian sensibilities, Malick’s editing patterns and dissonant narrative logic continue beyond those sequences that merely involve him. The central romance involving B.V. and Faye is the inverse of their respective relationships with Cook, and yet their activities are curiously portrayed through similar rhythmic editing methods (Zocchi, 19).

As discussed earlier in the chapter, Malick uses the background phenomena of light to highlight his transient narratives and, therefore, the lives of his characters. Dulac writes that the “visual impact is ephemeral, it’s an impression you receive and which suggests a thousand shots” (VAF, 34). Here, image ephemerality suggests movement, which is found in the mutable qualities of light and montage. Epstein asserts that, “The landscape may represent a state of mind. It is above all a state. A state of rest.” (JEM, 237). Malick uses magic hour cinematography to underscore the movement of light, as its inherent ephemerality echoes *Song to Song*’s elliptical narrative. Malick foregrounds this movement of light during the magic hour settings in several vignettes, such as B.V. and Faye skipping beneath an underpass at dusk or playing atop high-rise flats with the background sun on the horizon. The evening light which provides a backdrop for these fleeting anecdotes highlights the transience of B.V. and Faye’s remembered moments. There is a transient quality to the pure cinema features of light and editing rhythms in these scenes which echo the transient conditions of their kinetic lives. In particular, the way the light is framed during the underpass vignette is considerable as it is situated near the centre of the frame, sandwiched between the cusp of the horizon and the highway above. Here, the gesture and framing of light correlates with a moment of emotional elation as the camera tracks with Faye running and jumping into B.V.’s arms. In these moments, the movement of light complements the movement of the editing, of performance and these pure cinema features provide visual impressions and brief narrative details in the lives of the characters.

Williams writes that Dulac conceives of the cinema as “an intricate visual network –based on life, movement and rhythm” and that this prompts an “interplay between interior and exterior life and movement” (118-122). Dulac’s emphasis on the artistic rhythms and movements inherent in pure cinema suits Malick’s narrative and editing strategies, which are loosely connected by brief scenes that express non-causal rhythms. In her review of *Song to Song*, Manohla Dargis points to how Malick embraces fluidity as a visual principle [...] with its storytelling ellipses and visual fragments [that] places a heavy burden in his performers, who need to build their characters [...] in gestures and movement.” Malick generates this cumulative sense of image movement through pure cinema strategies of rhythmic camerawork, editing and lighting. These techniques focus on mobility as an expressive agent for the subjects, which is evident in *Song to Song*. These

strategies work in tandem with moments of *photogénie* through close-ups within his montage framework. Through these Impressionist methods, Malick explores the interplay of interior and exterior life within his characters, within the expressive framework of cinematic movement and in punctuated gestures.

The first image in *Song to Song* is set in a darkened hallway. A small trail of light enters from the centre-right frame, as we see Cook slowly opening a door which gradually lights Faye, who hides on the opposite side of the wall. This snippet acts as an ambiguous moment that uses light expressively to introduce the fraught dynamic of these characters; as Faye appears characteristically shy, curious and hesitant, whereas Cook is lurking, concealing half of himself. The subtle, gestural characteristic of these two is a pretext to understanding their personal qualities and problematic relationship. Moreover, the movement of light in this scene, as well as the minute physical movements of the characters, can be linked to Dulac's impressions of interior movement (TEC, 38).

Malick uses pure cinema techniques to situate the rhythmic montage structure of *Song to Song* within Dulac's charge for expressive feelings (AGC, 47-48). Like the opening of *Knight of Cups*, the first minute contains over a dozen cuts and location changes. We get fugitive glimpses various characters and forthcoming details of the splintered narrative, as Malick jumps headfirst into a montage style that encompasses the rest of the film. Malick then introduces the Austin music scene with a slow-motion sequence of a music festival mosh pit, followed by an image of B.V. cruising through the festival grounds, privately voicing his need to sing. Dulac charges that through pure cinema techniques that drama must "burst forth suggestively," and this is apparent in these sequences (ACG, 47). The electronic music that inundates the festival also seems to isolate B.V., as his off-centre, close-up expressions seem emotionally removed. B.V.'s countenance appears to be something of a self-conscious cliché, given Gosling's characteristic stoic expressions across his career. These shots are juxtaposed through cross-cutting with shots of Faye seen socializing in bars and casually flirting, in efforts to enhance her career prospects. She can be seen briefly playing rhythm guitar for the Black Lips, though her musical ventures are largely eschewed within the narrative. While *Song to Song* has a zippy narrative quality through

its fast cutting, other intensified continuity techniques of tracking camerawork and push-in close-ups further align the visual form of the film with the interiorities of the characters. This is especially evident in the camerawork as it hovers and follows B.V. and Faye in their opening sequences, emphasizing the movement of their performances, while complementing the rhythms of the montage.

The sequence following the initial voiceovers shows B.V., Cook and Faye for the first time together at one of Cook's parties. While the timeline of the film's plot is reasonably ambiguous, we understand that Cook and Faye are currently involved in a surreptitious affair, though this is the first meeting place for her and B.V. Instead of speaking forthrightly, they encircle one another and exchange fugitive glances. The roving camera also gestures toward the importance of this encounter as it slowly pushes-in for a tight framing of the couple, before idly shifting right to frame the sunset horizon. In particular, Faye pretends not to notice B.V., however, she curiously studies him when she thinks he isn't looking and blushes when he does. Mara's angular facial features further highlight her expressions and her noticeable dimples betray Faye's underlying feelings of affection. These amorous looks, rendered in medium close-ups, are emblematic of Epstein's discussions of photogenic facial gestures as punctuated, personalised sites of emotional movement. Dulac adds that "The large close-up is also an impressionistic note marking the fleeting influence of things that surround us" (ETC, 310). Epstein's enthusiasm for the aesthetic capacities of the close-up is apparent in this intensely personal, romantic moment in *Song to Song*. He writes: "Something is to be decided. A breeze of emotion underlines the mouth with clouds. The orography of the face vacillates. Seismic shocks begin." (JEM, 235). While Malick uses a medium close-up instead of a full close-up, Epstein's descriptive rhetoric of can be transposed onto B.V. and Faye's meeting, as they shyly survey one another, communicating through stolen glances, a timid brush of hand and betrayed smiles. Instead of verbally introducing themselves, Faye shares a cached iPod with B.V. and demurely tries to contain her interest in him. In lieu of words, she touches her lips, as the two sway to LaShun Pace's "I Know I've Been Changed" [Figure 13]. Through the suggestive, physical nature of their encounter Malick shears away dialogue in favour of photogenic gestures and gentle suggestions of their mutual, interior felicity.



Fig 13. Photogenic expressions of nascent amour with Faye (Rooney Mara) as she studies B.V. (Ryan Gosling) in *Song to Song*.

The shot of Faye in Figure 13 resembles a moment of romantic gesture in Dimitri Kirsanoff's Impressionist film *Ménilmontant* (1926). In *Ménilmontant*, there is a key sequence where the young protagonist (played by Kirsanoff's partner Nadia Sibirskaja) gazes affectionately up at her lover (Guy Belmont) as they rendezvous through the countryside. While enamoured with the prospect of new love, the nameless woman casts him coy glances as she nervously thumbs her lip, swirling and swooning in romantic expression [Figure 14]. Both photogenic moments are situated around montage sequences and this recalls Epstein's assertion that "an aspect is photogenic if it changes positions and varies simultaneously in space and time" (TEC, 25). These photogenic images are framed in such a manner as to focus on the inner stirrings of the two women. Within a conceptual framework of *photogénie*, one can comprehend how these specific images are characteristically imbued with photogenic meaning, as they are privileged and personal moments for these characters (I return to *Ménilmontant* below).



Fig 14. A behavioural gesture of reference with Nadia Sibirskaia in *Ménilmontant*.

Although Cook and Faye's affair is ongoing in the narrative background, the following section of the film deals with the early stages of B.V. and Faye's relationship. A twilight excursion to a Texan nature reserve shows the couple's blossoming intimacy, as they share a first onscreen kiss atop a mountain, framed in the transient evening twilight. It provides a sense of respite and emotional intimacy for the couple in the surrounding natural world. Given this break from the chaotic world of Cook, B.V. and Faye enjoy in a peaceful environment and relish in the aesthetic beauty of the magic hour, and the shots slightly lengthen to linger on these moments. These moments of respite, through longer spaces between shots, account for *Song to Song*'s 6 second ASL (according to *Cinematics*), despite sharing a similar intensified continuity style as *Knight of Cups*. Thus, the beatific, peaceful quality of the natural environment reflects similar positive feelings between the two. Situating the aesthetic quality of the visual environment as reflective of the characters' interiorities positions this sequence as a promising collage of euphoric moments and potential memories for B.V. and Faye.

Song to Song's episodic narrative gives impressions and trace details of the couple as they enjoy backstage festival activities and touring vacant high-rise flats that Faye housesits. As the couple savours one another's company, Malick will often cut around details of their conversations and instead focus on their facial gestures and reticent expressions, providing a gestural quality to both their performances and the elliptical cutting. One such example occurs when they play music, dance and draw lipstick caricatures on the window in one of Faye's flats, high atop a skyscraper. Their facial gestures echo Dulac's valuing of the aesthetics of interior character expressions (VAF, 45). It is during this period of frivolity that Faye also expresses the thematic core and namesake of the film via voiceover: "I thought we could just roll and tumble. Live from song to song. Kiss to kiss." This line manifests a central concept of Malick's contemporary film –of what it means to live through short experiences and cursory relationships, and to move through life with only impressions of oneself. These themes are reinforced when Faye shows B.V. a portrait of French poet Arthur Rimbaud, whose own paratextual, hedonistic attitudes exhibited both creative liberation and romantic exploitation, as is the case with Malick's entangled trio [Figure 15]. In describing Rimbaud to B.V., Faye nuzzles him and comments, "he experimented." This underscores her own impetuous attitudes, long with the restless, chaotic framework of the film itself.



Fig 15. Faye (Rooney Mara) shares in Rimbaud's provocative disposition, which alludes to the innovative attitudes of both the Impressionists and the *Weightless* trilogy.

The narrative montage structure of *Song to Song* reaches a fever pitch halfway through the film. At this point, Faye has exposed her duplicity to B.V. and they separate. Cook has (had) married Rhonda, a server and former schoolteacher, and the two begin a sadistic, open relationship. Cook's aggressive mien overwhelms Rhonda as she finds herself entangled in a series of personally damaging moments involving erotic affairs and drug abuse. The camera is restless in these moments as it tracks Cook and Rhonda through an apartment, while unsteadily moving around them. This dynamic camerawork also includes push-ins on Rhonda and these tight framings highlight her expressions and anxious reactions to Cook. This sense of imbalance is leavened by non-causal cutting which skips around dramatic moments of rough sexual encounters, as Malick provides his viewers with only impressions of his vignettes. Dulac argues that the essence of cinema is rooted within its movement: "It moves, it seizes forms, the rhythms and their spirit by attacking the nuances that reveal instinct" (qtd. in Williams, 180). Rhonda's arrested expressions within these formal techniques of movement signal this. The movement in these elliptical scenes is further punctuated by an anguished photogenic close-up of Rhonda, showing her immense fear and sorrow [Figure 16]. She trembles in response to Cook's exploitative violence and is lost for words as her tearful visage reddens in distress. These issues of movement and close-ups further exemplify the theoretical conceits of *photogénie*, manifested as a visual symphony of spatiotemporal variation in the story (Williams, 180; TEC, 25).



Fig 16. Rhonda (Natalie Portman) reacts with alarm and discloses her inner turmoil, which is associated with the violent, fearful anecdote that opens *Ménilmontant*.

It is within this montage sequence that Malick exposes his most audacious French Impressionist citation to date. In the images following Rhonda's fraught expressions, Malick embeds the opening sequence of *Ménilmontant*, showing the brutal murder of a countryside couple that occurs abruptly and without explanation. This inciting incident sets the narrative on a course wherein the couple's orphaned daughters will experience their own romantic entanglements, along with themes of abandonment and reconciliation. This is clearly a nod to the French Impressionist tradition on Malick's part. In my view, this sequence from *Ménilmontant* alludes to the violence of Rhonda's relationship with Cook, and later her own suicide. As this haunting sequence resurges onscreen in a flurry of violent imagery, I argue that the inclusion of this film provides further evidence and awareness of French Impressionism within Malick's filmmaking strategies. Malick's inclusion of the *Ménilmontant* sequence is unconventional, even for his current intensified mode, and the two films share in intensified montage aesthetics which engulf their respective narratives. Irrational character behaviour seems to bespeak the kinetic movement through both Kirsanoff and Malick's intensified continuities. Their visual aesthetics mirror character interiorities and each film showcases propulsive and rhythmic imagery through which

to unveil the emotional distress of the subjects, exposed by a deluge of violence. This visual framework is well suited in delineating *Song to Song*, as its splintered narrative both erupt and irrupts onscreen, promoting a constant tension between stasis and change (JERC, 23).

The second half of the film disrupts the narrative continuity even further, by offering divergent narratives with new tangent lovers for the initial trio (Blasi, 24). However, B.V.'s affair with Amanda fades, as does Faye's with Zoey, whereas Rhonda commits suicide offscreen. In select instances, some of the imagery resurfaces from earlier sections of the film, such as B.V. and Faye at the nature reserve, their holiday in Mexico and her exploits with Cook. These sequences are contracted recollections of previous narrative moments, which contextualize how the narrative events are now leading to a path of transcendence through forgiveness for B.V., and especially Faye. Malick's complicated narrative structure means that it is difficult to determine the temporality of specific scenes as the "present" comingles with apparent flashbacks. Narrative clarity gives way to a roiling stream of imagery and what Blasi refers to as complex configurations (24-25). Many of the flashbacks involve close-up images of Faye, stressing her perspective. Therefore, the montage framework of *Song to Song* presents evocations of old memories, which both Peter Bradshaw and Kenji Fujishima acknowledge in their reviews of the film. These apparent flashbacks appear to stem from Faye's perspective, given Malick's tight framings of her positioned next to these montages. There are also a few moments of *photogénie* where close-ups of Faye show her crying, juxtaposed with montage memories of both B.V. and Cook. In one such instance, Faye's cheeks twitch, she sighs and looks offscreen to the right as she contemplates feelings of guilt alongside happy memories with B.V. This formula of editing movement and close-ups, again, provides a sense of photogenic mobility. *Song to Song*'s flashback sequences blend in with the film's inclusive montage framework, further augmenting its already complex narrative structure. Through this more impressionistic foundation, Malick's subjectively infused imagery appears in frenetic eruptions and cycles.

The narrative even cycles back to new beginnings for the couple in the closing section of *Song to Song*, as they meet again at a Patti Smith party, which is a genuine musical space and site of potential and personal growth. Both partners have yearned for one another since separating and

they mutually forgive each other. Another exhibition of flashback imagery appears as Faye recites William Blake's "The Divine Image," while Smith's lyrically inspired song "My Blakean Year" plays in the background. Amorous, joyful memories of the couple resurge onscreen, as Blake's poem intones forgiving messages of "Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace."²³ As we see the couple taking respite in more natural spaces, the chaotic pace of the montage begins to ease and the shot length increases. Faye reflects: "It was like a new paradise. Forgiveness." However, after their initial reunion, B.V. announces his need to return home to care for his ailing family. This information is briefly noted by Faye via voiceover. Faye remains in Austin but promises to venture out and join him in the agrarian environment where he has found peaceful work and living. The final moments of the linear plot show B.V. laying contently in a tilled field next to his oil drill work site, awash in the transient magic hour as the sun sets behind him. Through their forgiveness and reconciliation, they have transcended their emotional weightlessness and the restless impressions of their lives come to rest.

The film reaches an apotheosis with a closing montage sequence, which reprises the early memory of B.V. and Faye at the nature reserve. As an emotional crux and moment of personal transcendence, this memory sequence resituates the couple in moments of mutual consolation and grace within one another. These memories also signal mutual forgiveness from the previous trials and infidelities of their relationship. Dulac and Epstein both write about cinematic transcendence through expressive imagery, via light, movement, rhythms and close-ups. Malick employs these pure cinematic and photogenic techniques, where an aesthetically transcendent quality of imagery articulates the transcendent experience of these two lovers. The sweeping camera movements, privileged close-ups and more relaxed editing rhythms visually express the blooming, emotional intimacy of the couple through collective Impressionist strategies. While the fading light exemplifies the transitional state of these emotionally intense moments, the memory of nascent love and the interior lives of these two are expressed through nuanced stylistic choices such as elliptical editing and kinetic camerawork. These are further enhanced by push-ins and photogenic close-ups, such as B.V. and Faye washing one another in a pool of water at the nature reserve. The final image of B.V. and Faye embracing in the ephemeral,

²³ Faye reading the poem aloud.

natural sunset vista stands as a testament to an enduring Impressionist value of visually evoking subjective, inner worlds through cinematic techniques. B.V. and Faye's tumultuous romance ends in forgiveness, reconciliation and potential, as the transient, closing image shows them enfolded together, basking in the fading light of the day. In Zocchi's words, "*Song to Song* is the discovery of the individual human experience of the divine category of mercy. If *The Tree of Life* poses the cosmic question [i.e. to discover reconciliation and personal transcendence], *Song to Song* gives the dramatic, human answer" (29).

Conclusion

The thesis has responded to the question of how a French Impressionist critical approach can be used to interpret Malick's work. Malick's films have frequently been described as lyrical, poetic and impressionistic, and the scholarly approaches to his work have primarily centred on issues of philosophy and spirituality. However, the Weightless trilogy has received less scholarly attention, yet Malick's evolving filmmaking methods and the specific stylistic strategies of the trilogy invite a new critical framework with which to analyse the aesthetic qualities of these recent films. Therefore, I have argued that a French Impressionist framework can be used to analyse the Weightless trilogy and, indeed, Malick's other films. Granted, this thesis is selective in its use case studies, concerning both Malick and the Impressionists. However, while the parameters and requirements of this paper yield certain limitations that keep us from discussing these points more comprehensively, the arguments herein provide a useful platform for exploring and further developing this critical approach. Moreover, we can credit a French Impressionist approach to Malick's work in its value for connecting his evolving style and aesthetics to early film theory; in addition to how these methods are illuminating in better understanding and appreciating aspects of his style which have been more recently critiqued for their apparent elusive and opaque qualities.

Malick's mode of filmmaking in the Weightless trilogy combines episodic, even fragmented narrative structures with the stylistic strategies of intensified continuity. I have demonstrated that Dulac's theories concerning pure cinema can be used to analyse the trilogy, as well as Malick's other works. Dulac claimed that light, movement and rhythm are vital aspects of pure cinema. These techniques are aesthetically important because they are specific to cinema and because they can provide a sense of emotion that connects qualities of the image with character interiority. Dulac argued that cinematic movement is created through character performance and object mobility within the frame. Additionally, performative movement of facial and physical expressions intimates a sense of emotional movement. Such movement is enhanced by camerawork and the ability of cinematography to capture kinetic qualities of light through its natural transience. Editing then creates rhythms through colligated images which already convey

expressive mobility. In sum, these formal ingredients of cumulative movement create pure cinema.

I have discussed pure cinema techniques in Malick films such as *Days of Heaven*, *To the Wonder*, *The Tree of Life* and *Song to Song*. These films employ stylistic strategies such as magic hour cinematography, roving handheld camera work, mobile background objects and elliptical editing. Moreover, these features are coupled in some instances with stylistic choices associated with intensified continuity like fast cutting, tight framing, camera push-ins and wide angle lenses. This stylistic framework often endows Malick's later films with the kinetic qualities valued in a pure cinema perspective.

While intensified continuity and pure cinema techniques are most prominent in the Weightless trilogy, traces of these cinematic methods are evident earlier in Malick's career, and not only in *Days of Heaven*. The closing scene of *Badlands* underscores pure cinema values by showing the camera sailing high through the clouds during the magic hour. This final moment details pure cinema features through tracking camerawork, shifting light, moving clouds and in its durational brevity. While the editing and camerawork in Malick's first film are far less kinetic than his others, this closing scene seems to portend these transient, mobile strategies which will increase throughout his career. In *The New World*, Malick opens his film with a montage of the Powhatan people swimming underwater and watching the colonial ships arrive and land ashore. As with the opening of *The Thin Red Line*, these rhythms and onscreen movements create a sense of tranquil harmony as characters are immersed in natural environments. The opening sequence even ends with an interesting low-angle, tight framing of Matoaka/Pocahontas (Q'orianka Kilcher) gesturing and praying towards the sky above. *The New World* contains several sequences shot during twilight and the cinematography emphasizes the transient quality of light.²⁴ A freeranging camera is ubiquitous, and non-causal editing generates a more fragmented narrative than in Malick's prior films. These pure cinema techniques furnish a noticeable perspective of French

²⁴ *The New World* was the first of many collaborations with Lubezki.

Impressionist film theory which can be further evidenced in films outside of Impressionist-era cinema.

As a key Impressionist tenet, *photogénie* entails a sense of elusiveness and aesthetic rarity. Epstein's expressive rhetoric and aesthetic posturing make it challenging to clearly define *photogénie*. Nevertheless, his essays reveal a formal framework through which to discover moments of *photogénie*. He proposes that *photogénie* exists within a space-time system in which the photogenic image has an ephemeral image quality. He links *photogénie* to expressive close-ups. These are usually brief, privileged moments of dramatic intensity. They are positioned within fast-paced montages. This develops an aesthetic tension between the stillness of the photogenic close-up and the dynamic quality of the editing. The discussions involved in this thesis have also allowed us to further develop our understanding of *photogénie* in contemporary filmmaking, and how Epstein's concept has value and continuation in recent cinema.

Chapter two examined examples of *photogénie* in *The Thin Red Line* and *Knight of Cups* and how photogenic techniques in these films also reveal Malick's interests in character interiority through Impressionist strategies. While both montages and close-ups appear throughout different sequences and scenes in *TTRL*, there are certain moments that signal *photogénie*. Key dramatic moments occur with the textual examples of Staros and Tall, through the respective close-up framings of these men and their pauses from the more kinetic editing sequences. These close-ups contain expressive instances where the viewer can focus intently on the silent, physical gestures of the characters while they react to the emotional weight of the narrative events. By extension, the gestural quality of these images indicates an intense emotional movement that conveys crucial, albeit ambiguous, internal changes for the characters. In *Knight of Cups*, there are many possible instances of *photogénie*, though I focused primarily on Rick as a central character, as the photogenic movement and close-ups of him closely follows the intensified continuity strategies and kinetic qualities of the film. As I argued, the examples of *photogénie* associated with Rick illustrate important moments of underlying change in his life, as he journeys away from a chaotic lifestyle towards a state of personal fulfilment and redemption.

While examples of *photogénie* are explored across case studies in chapters two and three, *photogénie* can be found elsewhere in Malick's films. *To the Wonder* employs many of the stylistic strategies of the other Weightless trilogy films, including non-causal, rhythmic editing and close-ups. One such instance of *photogénie* can be found in the film's closing moments with Marina traversing through the natural landscape. *To the Wonder*'s denouement shows Neil and Marina separating, though Malick suggests that they forgive one another and achieve a tentative, personal peace for themselves. In light of this forgiveness, a final montage of Marina running through an autumnal field shows a split-second close-up of her hesitant expression. While it is ambiguous as to whether her expression points to fearful or hopeful feelings, the final close-up of Marina contains all of the events bound in one punctuated instance of great emotional significance. Similarly, can one locate *photogénie* in *Days of Heaven* during the night-time fire sequence. As one of the more dynamic sequences of the film, there is a privileged moment within the montage where Malick pauses to show a close-up of the Farmer. He conveys a frighteningly dejected and enraged expression, right before he lashes at Bill. Again, Malick uses photogenic techniques of kinetic image movement through editing and brief close-ups to accentuate crucial emotional moments for his characters.

In 2019, Malick released *A Hidden Life*, his first film after the Weightless trilogy. The film concerns the life and death of Franz Jägerstätter (August Diehl), an Austrian Catholic and conscientious objector who was martyred by the Nazis during World War Two. Since his next film, currently in production, *The Way of the Wind*, is about Jesus of Nazareth, some may believe that Malick will adopt a more restrained visual style that is appropriate for such solemn material. However, while *A Hidden Life* moves away from the freneticism of the Weightless trilogy, it still uses Impressionist strategies such as attention to natural light, tight framings, close-ups, kinetic, handheld camerawork and rhythmic cutting. *The Way of the Wind* is rumoured to deal with Jesus' life in the form of parables and thus seems likely to have the kind of episodic narrative structure to which Malick is drawn. What is certain is that these two films continue Malick's interest in spirituality and, potentially, grace and forgiveness. This thesis has shown that French Impressionist concepts like *photogénie* and pure cinema will inform our understanding of how his aesthetic strategies provide fleeting impressions of his characters' lives, their emotional

transience and how the sum of cinematic movement builds towards cathartic states of transcendence. Moreover, the implications of these claims allow us to not only credit French Impressionist film theory in a contemporary context, but to also introduce a fresh critical approach that provides a reappraisal of Malick's recent work in the Weightless trilogy, and situates Dulac and Epstein's theories as extant features of cinematic discourse that hold weight today.

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Filmography

Arabesque (Germaine Dulac, 1929)
Badlands (Terrence Malick, 1973)
Chute de la Maison Usher, La (Jean Epstein, 1928)
Coeur Fidèle (Jean Epstein, 1923)
Coquille et le Clergyman, La (Germaine Dulac, 1928)
Days of Heaven (Terrence Malick, 1978)
La Glace à trois faces (Jean Epstein, 1927)
A Hidden Life (Terrence Malick, 2019)
Knight of Cups (Terrence Malick, 2015)
Maternelle, La (Marie Epstein and Benoît-Lévy, 1933)
Ménilmontant (Dimitri Kirsanoff, 1926)
The New World (Terrence Malick, 2005)
Or des mers, L' (Jean Epstein, 1933)
Rashomon (Akira Kurosawa, 1950).
Sa Tête (Jean Epstein, 1928)
Six et demi onze (Jean Epstein, 1927)
Song to Song (Terrence Malick, 2017)
Souriante Madame Beudet, La (Germaine Dulac, 1923)
Thèmes et variations (Germaine Dulac, 1928)
The Thin Red Line (Terrence Malick, 1998)
The Tree of Life (Terrence Malick, 2011)
The Way of the Wind (Terrence Malick, forthcoming)
To the Wonder (Terrence Malick, 2012)
Voyage of Time (Terrence Malick, 2016)

Image Appendix

- Fig 1. Brooke Adams and Sam Shepard in *Days of Heaven*. Dir. Terrence Malick. Paramount, 1978. DVD.
- Fig 2. Olga Kurylenko in *To the Wonder*. Dir. Terrence Malick. Magnolia, 2012. DVD.
- Fig 3. Léon Mathot in *Coeur Fidèle*. Dir. Jean Epstein, 1923. Youtube.
- Fig 4. Gina Manès in *Coeur Fidèle*. Dir. Jean Epstein, 1923. Youtube.
- Fig 5. Nick Nolte in *The Thin Red Line*. Dir. Terrence Malick. The Criterion Collection, 2010. DVD.
- Fig 6. Christian Bale in *Knight of Cups*. Dir. Terrence Malick. Broad Green, 2015. DVD.
- Fig 7. Hunter McCracken in *The Tree of Life*. Dir. Terrence Malick. The Criterion Collection, 2018. DVD.
- Fig 8. Jessica Chastain, Tye Sheridan and Laramie Eppler in *The Tree of Life*. Dir. Terrence Malick. The Criterion Collection, 2018. DVD.
- Fig 9. Jessica Chastain's redemptive gesture of grace through light in *The Tree of Life*. Dir. Terrence Malick. The Criterion Collection, 2018. DVD.
- Fig 10. Natural imagery in *Earth*. Dir. Aleksandr Dovzhenko, 1930.
- Fig 11. Natural imagery in *The Tree of Life*. Dir. Terrence Malick. The Criterion Collection, 2018. DVD.
- Fig 12. *Lumia Opus 161* in *The Tree of Life*. Dir. Terrence Malick. The Criterion Collection, 2018. DVD.
- Fig 13. Ryan Gosling and Rooney Mara in *Song to Song*. Dir. Terrence Malick. Broad Green, 2017. DVD.
- Fig 14. Nadia Sibirskaia in *Ménilmontant*. Dir. Dmitri Kirsanoff, 1926. Youtube.
- Fig 15. Rooney Mara in *Song to Song*. Dir. Terrence Malick. Broad Green, 2017. DVD.
- Fig 16. Natalie Portman in *Song to Song*. Dir. Terrence Malick. Broad Green, 2017. DVD.

Note on the Text

This thesis has generally followed MLA style in its citations. Nonetheless, to maintain a degree of brevity with the in-text citations, I have endeavoured to abbreviate those articles linked to authors whose surname appears in multiple quantities. Therefore, certain books and articles are abbreviated below with acronyms. Full reference details are additionally listed in the bibliography.

- (ACMFP) David Bordwell. "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice."
- (AGC) Germaine Dulac. "The Avant-Garde Cinema."
- (AOIC) Germaine Dulac. "Aesthetics, Obstacles, Integral Cinégraphie."
- (ARR) Sarah Keller. "'As Regarding Rhythm': Rhythm in Modern Poetry and Cinema."
- (DC) Sarah Keller. "Jean Epstein's documentary cinephilia."
- (EC) Germaine Dulac. "The Essence of the Cinema: The Visual Idea."
- (ETC) Germaine Dulac. "The Expressive Techniques of the Cinema."
- (GPEN) Sarah Keller. "Gambling on *Photogénie*: Epstein Now."
- (JECI) Malcolm Turvey. "Jean Epstein's Cinema of Immanence: The Rehabilitation of the Corporeal Eye."
- (JERC) Sarah Keller. "Introduction: Jean Epstein and Revolt of Cinema."
- (JEM) Jean Epstein. "Magnification."
- (IC) David Bordwell. "Intensified Continuity Visual Style in Contemporary American Film."
- (LMC) Tom Gunning. "Light, Motion, Cinema!: The Heritage of Loie Fuller and Germaine Dulac"
- (NFF) David Bordwell. *Narration in the Fiction Film*.
- (OH) Sarah Keller. "'Optical Harmonies': Sight and Sound in Germaine Dulac's Integral Cinema."
- (OCCP) Jean Epstein. "On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*."
- (SE) Robert Sinnerbrink. "Song of the Earth: Cinematic Romanticism in Malick's *The New World*."
- (TEC) Jean Epstein. "The Essence of Cinema." (TDMC) Tami Williams. "Toward the Development of a Modern 'Impressionist' Cinema: Germaine Dulac's *La Belle Dame sans merci* (1921) and the Deconstruction of the Femme Fatale Archetype."
- (TMFP) Robert Sinnerbrink. *Terrence Malick: Filmmaker and Philosopher*.
- (VAF) Germaine Dulac. "From 'Visual and Anti-Visual Films.'"
- (VOW) Russell J.A. Kilbourn "(No) Voice Out of the Whirlwind: The Book of Job and the End of the World in *A Serious Man*, *Take Shelter*, and *The Tree of Life*."

