

Fields of Progress: The Mechanization of Agriculture in *Days of Heaven*

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Introduction

The films of Terrence Malick actively resist summation, and his second full-length picture, *Days of Heaven* (1978), is no exception. Where Pauline Kael dismissed it as “all visual bombast,” Dave Kehr, writing in the *Chicago Reader*, described it as “very possibly, a masterpiece”; Harold Schonberg complained that the plot is muddled by “all kinds of fancy, self-conscious cineaste techniques,” while one enthusiastic partisan recently insists that it is the “greatest film ever made.”¹ And though commentators have creatively read *Days of Heaven* as a biblical allegory, have examined its technical innovations, and have deconstructed its relationship to frontier ideologies, little attention has been paid to the film’s depictions of the rural terrain of the Texas Panhandle in 1916.² Or, to be more specific, there has been little notice of its examination of laboring bodies inhabiting the edges of the agricultural zones of the South and the Midwest during a transitional period marked by the arrival of mechanized labor. Although the film has commonly been understood as a product of the postmodern, it most forcefully leverages a series of tensions, conflicts, and aesthetic techniques from the early twentieth century in order to register the expansive, period-straddling reverberations of industrial modernization.

I argue below that this double interest in tactics of cultural production associated with both the early and the late twentieth century makes it possible to

use *Days of Heaven* as a means of assessing the continuities and discontinuities, the repetitions and diffusions, that characterize relationships between expressive artifacts of both the 1910s and 1920s and the 1970s, thereby revealing the sustained relevance of the unsettling modernity of the film's rural setting. In an incisive essay exploring poetic responses to scientific literatures about U.S. rurality, Maria Farland describes the complex of roles the countryside plays in early-twentieth-century cultural discourse, calling for work that fills the "void in the literary study of rural problems."³ This essay seeks to answer that call insofar as it demonstrates how *Days of Heaven*'s destabilizing combination of the visual and the verbal, its distinctive strategies of representing the rural, can provide a critical lens for examining the persistence of the agricultural and the pastoral as a default mode of representation and analysis in American studies. To that end I argue that with its (south)western geographies, its dramatic visual iconography, and its ominous account of agricultural progress, *Days of Heaven* emerges from the same genealogy as such foundational myth-and-symbol studies as R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955), Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), and Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964).⁴ Yet the film offers a somber reconsideration of those earlier visions, narrativizing the mechanization of agriculture to emphasize the mutually destructive logic of exploitation and violence present in both its contemporary moment and its "historical" *mise-en-scène*.

One of *Days of Heaven*'s most notable qualities, then, is its attention to emergent technologies of communication, mobility, and (re)production. Consequently the film's intertwining motifs of the natural and the technological provide a useful perspective on Leigh Anne Duck's question about "how cultural forms considered anachronistic could coexist in often vital relationships with those recognized as central to modernization."⁵ In the film's economy of objects, mechanical technologies exist alongside older tools and practices, all within landscapes that both resist and absorb their effects. A prosaic example, but one that keeps with the film's larger themes, comes from the stage direction in Malick's original screenplay, which describes one character reaping wheat "with a mowing machine called a binder" alongside another who gathers sheaves by hand.⁶ It's clear throughout the narrative that arrivals of the modern occur unevenly, in shifts, without a vacuum to fill. How does a film of 1978 imagine 1916? As an interlocking, asymmetrical compound of what-will-be and what-was that critiques existing powers at the same time as it reveals the deadly consequences of resistance borne on the individual body. The old and the new, in other words, jointly form *Days of Heaven*'s visions of the pre-war American modern—and provide a stage to host its tragic drama. Woven into Malick's story of personal deception and destructive ambition, however, is a broader narrative about industrial modernization's effects on the rural landscape. My purpose here is to explore the junctures at which these two tales cross: to consider how *Days of Heaven*'s tropes of migration and labor, of race and region, assess the consequences of mechanized agriculture, a phenomenon

with ecological and cultural legacies that came under increased scrutiny in the late-1970s moment of its release.

Screening Rural Modernization

In its broadest dimensions, the film's narrative feels at once straightforwardly conventional and oddly foreshortened. *Days of Heaven* imagines the fates of Bill and Abby, working-class lovers living in Chicago with Bill's younger sister, Linda. Following a violent encounter with his factory foreman, Bill leads the group south and they fall in with a procession of seasonal itinerant workers who migrate atop trains through the agricultural sectors of the Midwest and the South. After settling into a large-scale wheat outfit run by a man known simply as the Farmer, Bill and Abby pass as brother and sister in order to avert questions about their relationship and history. The Farmer takes romantic interest in Abby, and upon covertly learning of the man's terminal illness, Bill encourages a marriage, if only to inherit his holdings at the end of his term. Against the advice of his closest counselor, the Farmer does marry Abby, opening his home to the group and entering into a period of revitalized health. But the lie wears thin, and, in concert with a devastating plague of locusts, the Farmer sets off a chain of events that results in both his death and Bill's and that permanently severs the connection between Abby and Linda.

While the film is able to host a rough range of viewpoints, it ultimately declines to establish a final order, with one result being that atmosphere and image frequently eclipse plot and characterization in the film's matrix of meaning making. Under this light it's easier to catch the significance of Malick's attempts to recreate the cultural and physical landscapes of the early twentieth century and to revise what cultural geographer Doreen Massey identifies as a trope common to a "modernist territorial spatiality":⁷ a rigid distinction between the phenomenological and cultural consequences of the country against the city.⁸ In her call for more reflective accounts of space's cultural functions, for instance, Massey argues for greater recognition of the "mutual constitution" of the "natural" and the technological, thereby refuting approaches that forward "coherent regions in rooted indigeneity."⁹ Although modernism/modernity are routinely imagined as manifestly urban phenomena, recent scholars have pushed back, theorizing iterations of modernism and modernity that account for conditions of the rural.¹⁰ Still, this is a modest correction to two prominent strands of thinking: one envisions the country landscape as either alienated from modernity and, as a result, dangerously out of pace with contemporary life and ethics (as in popular images created by Sinclair Lewis or H. L. Mencken, for instance); the other positions the rural as a pristine space apart, one whose out-of-paceness shields against the corrupting influences, the overwhelming speed and scales, of cosmopolitanism and industrialism (as in much of T. S. Eliot's work, as well as the projects of the Nashville Agrarians). *Days of Heaven*, however, recognizes

that both sides are so deeply enmeshed with one another that their ultimate separation is impossible.

The spatiality of Malick's images of the early twentieth century is elucidated by contrast with F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927), a film that developed the cinematic grammar of the same period that provides *Days of Heaven* its milieu, and one that likewise explores interactions of the rural and the urban. As if to nudge its narrative into the realm of allegory, *Sunrise*'s characters are not identified by name but through generic descriptions, their actions suggesting a representative account of the country and the city in conflict. Thus the ominous "Woman from the City" arrives in the country for vacation and seduces "the Man" with promises of bright lights and modern amenities, going so far as to convince him to drown his dutiful, provincial wife in the lake that acts as both their village's centerpiece and its boundary against the metropolis. The Man experiences a last-minute change of heart though. Instead of following through with his plan he escorts his wife to the city, their reconciliation achieved, curiously enough, through technologically mediated urban spaces such as the photography studio and the neon spectacle of the carnival. After a near-deadly trip across the stormy lake, the couple makes a speedy return to the safety of the provinces. Nice place to visit, it turns out, but you wouldn't want to live there. Although the Man is ultimately persuaded by the virtues of his rural environment to repudiate the urban-modern and to abandon his murderous plans (the lake never looked so lovely as the night he rowed his wife out to its center), the film promotes a hard distinction between urbanity and rusticity by imagining a nostalgic idyll in which an innocent hamlet brushes up against the destroying angels of progress and sophistication.

Malick's film trades upon similar contrasts between the rural and the urban, but the total effect is modulated: the arrival of city people does indeed precipitate the corruption of a country space, but there's an unmistakable sense that those wheat fields are already tainted by an unbalanced distribution of capital and labor, by the creative destruction of industrial development, its fluid vectors of exchange and its massive machines. So while *Sunrise* offers a warning against the effects of the urban on a culturally bounded rural space, *Days of Heaven* is more specifically concerned with the countryside's imbrication in sprawling networks of commodity capitalism and industrial technologies.

An even earlier antecedent to *Days of Heaven* is D. W. Griffith's 1909 short film *A Corner in Wheat*. Based on Frank Norris's novel *The Pit* (1903), the film describes the efforts of a commodities speculator who spends lavishly after monopolizing the wheat market, only to be killed in an accident at a wheat mill. Interspersed with this account, the film also exposes the consequences of the monopoly on a group of industrious wheat farmers, binding the two worlds but never allowing them to share a single frame. In a striking montage, the film flashes between the excess and chaos of the trading floor and the determined self-sufficiency—and loneliness—of a farmer planting his fields. These are two fundamentally different modes of labor, two fundamentally different lifestyles,

and the spatial distance between the country and the city becomes a defining feature of these divisions. *Days of Heaven*, on the other hand, merges elements of the country and the city, undoing their fixed meanings. Specifically, the film relocates the wealth of the city and the wheat market—what Griffith's film presents as “gold of the wheat”—back within the country itself, in the Farmer's lavishly furnished home and in his reputation as the region's richest man. The Farmer here has little to do with the farmer of the earlier texts—a “farmer” in Malick's late-century imagination looks, above all else, like an agent of agribusiness.¹¹ While Griffith juxtaposes the two worlds, positioning them in a distant relationship of cause and effect, Malick forces them into the same space, where the effects and the causes are somehow both less clear and more immediate, always colliding, always jostling for primacy.

Contemporary criticism of *Days of Heaven*, however, has often upheld common spatial binaries. Ben McCann, for example, argues that the film underscores the “dichotomies between urban and rural”: “Bill, Abby, and Linda flee the industrial blight of the city, all steel-grey color schemes and grimy bleakness . . . [for] an exploration of, and integration into, nature.”¹² While it's true that the film derives plenty of energy from the tensions between the country and the city, the “natural” world the characters step into is neither a pastoral retreat nor is it unburdened of industrialization. In its way, in fact, the Panhandle farm of *Days of Heaven* is as thoroughly modernized as the Chicago cityscape the family flees. It is, for instance, tied to the same national and international trade and rail routes as Chicago, and subject to forces that generate landscapes of diffusion and mixture.¹³ Not surprisingly, then, the countryside of *Days of Heaven* is an uncanny blend of the organic and the mechanical, of both horse-drawn threshing machines and steam-powered harvesters; technological devices litter the scene: airplanes, filmstrips, a mechanical calculator, and motorized vehicles of all varieties. The film likewise envisions a topography that, with its vast rows of uniform crops stretching uphill and down, owes its very shape and purpose to techno-industrial intervention. In fact, the farm itself is perhaps best described as a factory inconveniently subject to the vagaries of the open air: weather, fire, a plague of locusts scaled to the Book of Exodus. To underscore the centrality of the monocrop apparatus of the wheat farm and its ties to urban-industrial production, one early scene pictures Linda, working her way, piece by piece, through a pile of artificial flowers in a Chicago tenement building, sewing identical fabric petals to matching stems in an act that accents the Fordist methods, if not magnitudes, that will be essential to the mass cultivation of another kind of plant later in the narrative.

The farm's method of industrialized human labor is one of the surest signs of its investments in both industrial and political modernity. For if, as Giorgio Agamben declares, “the birth of the camp in our time appears as an event that decisively signals the political space of modernity,” then the biopolitical turn toward the management of laborers on display in *Days of Heaven's* camp scenes provides an optic that brings the film's larger investigations of early-

twentieth-century rural-industrial modernization into focus.¹⁴ Although Agamben is primarily interested in the concentration camps of Europe, his analysis gains additional traction in labor/relocation camps of the United States such as the one represented in Malick's film. Within a tightly circumscribed space anchored by a house that, according to the screenplay, "occupies the highest ridge around, commanding the view and esteem of all" ("Don't any of you go up around there," the Foreman warns), migrant workers are channeled across and through the landscape, subject to constant surveillance, fed and lodged, and generally protected as bare life throughout the harvest season.¹⁵ Although they arrive at their own volition, when in the camp the workers are always subject to the authority of the Foreman, always made to feel the force of the Farmer's sovereignty. As Linda observes, "He had a big spread and a lot of money. Whoever was sitting in a chair when he'd come around, they'd stand up and give it to him." And yet it's the Foreman who acts as the sharpest instrument of the Farmer's power: with a single gesture, for example, he directs the crowd of workers after the priest's pre-harvest blessing; he is also the one who challenges Bill for his wasteful sacking practices ("You wanna stay? Shut up and get back to work!"). And so, although they are paid, the relative absence of self-determination among the migrant workers—as well as their location on the fringe of the agricultural South—ensures that they continually operate in the shadow of the plantation, an economic-production regime that, as commentators from Eric Williams to Sven Beckert have noted, played a direct role in the global rise of capitalist modernity.¹⁶ A voiceover from Linda, running above a montage of sackers that includes images of Bill and Abby struggling with hand-toted loads of wheat, explains the arrangement: "From the time the sun went up, until it went down, they was working all the time. Non-stop. They just kept going. You didn't work, they'd ship you right outta there."

The farm, then, becomes an intermediary space tying the slave-holding plantation to the long series of horrific camps that appear and reappear throughout the twentieth century. To this end, it's worth considering Achille Mbembe's reading of the "plantation and its aftermath" as the "emblematic and paradoxical figure of the state of exception."¹⁷ Although the film provides acute representations of bare life workers who are, in Mbembe's words, "kept alive but in a *state of injury*" by their enforced subordinate position, it is also centrally concerned with the problems that arise when those positions begin to lose distinction, when the state of exception fails so soundly that the sovereign slips out of place.¹⁸ On a plantation that isn't quite a plantation, the film depicts a relationship between a near-slave and her master that unravels the delicate power structures maintaining order on the farm. And by drawing Bill, a hungry and savvy worker, up to the master's quarters in violation of exception's spatial boundaries, the Farmer precipitates his own personal destruction and the dissolution of his sovereignty.

Anthological Postmodernism

Much as *Days of Heaven* stages a series of conflicts revolving around the arrival of a mechanized landscape most readily associated with capitalist modernity, it remains a product of a late-1970s period most readily associated with the postmodern. Is this characterization primarily a matter of chronology or of aesthetic agency? In his assessment of Malick's oeuvre, Lloyd Michaels argues that the films all present a "resistance to the irony, fragmentation, and lack of conviction that characterizes postmodernism as well as much of modern cinema."¹⁹ On one level *Days of Heaven* does seem to hold a lack of conviction at arm's length, but it's certainly not the case that either the film's narrative schema or its characters lack fragmentation. In fact, it's this very "postmodern" quality that has offended many of the film's critics, who complain of its underdeveloped narrative and its ponderous visual aesthetic. It's not that the film lacks for action; it's that the exposition offered occasionally feels insufficient, too full of gaps and, in a word, too fragmented to account for that action. Ultimately, Michaels may fail to recognize the nesting-doll approach Malick takes to the formal qualities associated with the film's relevant periods, its use of important technical features of postmodern cinema to reanimate and reevaluate the meanings of the modern moment it depicts.

More specifically, the film's fictional location in time is strongly signaled in its shorthand references to films, photographs, and paintings from the first half of the twentieth century. Cinematographer Nestor Alemendros, whose work is responsible for so much of *Days of Heaven's* visual texture, explains the templates that Malick and his crew used as well as their reasons for shooting with natural light:

Our model was the photography of early films (Griffith, Chaplin, etc.), which often used natural light. . . . In the daytime interiors we used light that came sideways through the windows as in a Vermeer. There were also references to Wyeth, Hopper, and other American artists. But as the credits indicate, we were particularly inspired by the great photo-reporters of the turn of the century (like Hine), whose books Malick had a plentiful supply of.²⁰

Not only does the film seek to recreate the physical details of the period, it also attempts to recreate the period's distinctive visual patina. The final product may be a case of form dictating content since accounts of the film's production hold that major features of the original script were jettisoned because of uncooperative light. In its anachronistic approach to lighting, then, the film deliberately replicates the outmoded practices of the same era that it seeks to represent.

With this technique in mind, I want to suggest that *Days of Heaven's* commitments to historical verisimilitude come to embody a version of Joanna Man-

cini's concept of "anthological modernism," a description of projects aiming to preserve strands of folk culture threatened by the standardization of modernization—or, as Mancini has it, "the development of technologies for the containment of authenticity."²¹ (Prominent examples here might include Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952), the fieldwork of John and Alan Lomax, and the conservationist ethos pervading *Fox Fire* magazine.) While Malick's film lacks some of the rigor for the "authentic" that characterizes efforts of other anthological modernists (*Days of Heaven* includes a number of subtle anachronisms, for instance), and although the film is not exclusively concerned with "folk" cultures, it is guided by a similar drive to document a cultural moment edging toward obsolescence—the point before industrial development lays claim to a major share of American agriculture and its landscapes. Hence Malick's intense efforts to evoke the period's material culture, from the mansion down to the farm tools, in an attention to detail that prompted critic David Denby to decry the film's "studied, post-modernist museum show texture."²² Despite its best efforts, though, the distance of time and space ensures that *Days of Heaven* cannot fully recapture its subject, and there remains an unavoidable trace of the pastiche in its efforts. This is a version of the pastiche that is, in Richard Dyer's estimation, "always an imitation of an imitation."²³ It's worth taking Denby at his word, then, and positing that the absence of the "real thing" points toward both the film's modern concerns and its postmodern methods since, as I show below, viewers encounters with *Days of Heaven*'s subjects are frequently mediated—in ways both obvious and less-than-obvious—by texts.

A relevant, related technique here, and one laminated onto discussions of the postmodern by Frederic Jameson, is photorealism. In his celebrated examination of the photorealist painters, Jameson might also be explaining some of what is behind *Days of Heaven*'s careful recreations of an absent referent: photorealism, he writes, "looked like a return to representation and figuration, after the long hegemony of the aesthetic of abstraction, until it became clear that their objects were not to be found in the 'real world' either but were themselves photographs of that real world."²⁴ We should not mistake *Days of Heaven*'s careful evocations of turn-of-the-century material culture *and* aesthetic techniques as an attempt simply to recover a lost world since in its practice of constructing moving pictures out of stationary—and iconic—ones, the film participates in the same shift toward simulacra. It's in this move that the contrast with Mancini's "anthological modernism" becomes enormously suggestive: if we adapt her terminologies to accommodate the self-referential world of the postmodern, it's easy to see that late-century attempts to preserve and reproduce a vanished culture will always bear a touch of the simulacrum. I suggest that *Days of Heaven* qualifies as a form of "anthological postmodernism" because of its extra remove from the cultures it represents: where anthological modernism dealt directly with the people and practices it sought to catalog, the pastiche of Malick's anthological postmodernism uses media and aesthetic artifacts as the port of entry. These are mechanically reproducible artifacts such as films, pho-

tographs, and art books that work, in fulfillment of Walter Benjamin's famous prediction, to unfasten the art object from its aura, thereby creating radical aesthetic and political possibilities.²⁵ In Malick's case, the air of self-conscious intertextuality has the potential to upend longstanding associations and implications of rurality and rusticity in the twentieth-century imaginary.

Take, for instance, the specific reference to paintings such as Wyeth's *Christina's World* (1948) and Hopper's *House by the Railroad* (1925) in the shape and setting of the Farmer's mansion [Figure 1]. These references to visual art also ground the potential meanings of the film's spatial coordinates. In 1935, Grant Wood's widely read manifesto "Revolt Against the City" proposed a wide-scale movement away from the city toward the generative possibilities of "the great central areas of America."²⁶ It is to these reputedly provincial agricultural regions that American artists and intellectuals should look for inspiration—to the "newer America," that great-untapped vein of raw aesthetic materials.²⁷ *Days of Heaven* works the same stretch of ground to different effect. The prairies—so important to Wood and his cohort of American Scene painters but also essential to other arbiters of Anglo exploration and the frontier mythos, from Walt Whitman to William Cullen Bryant, Frederick Jackson Turner to Carl Sandburg and Hamlin Garland (whose novel *Boy Life on the Prairies* (1899) provides the original screenplay's epigraph)—are scorched and left barren in *Days of Heaven*. There is, we can assume, an ecologically regenerative function to the flames, but none of that happens within the film's proscenium—this is a story of destruction, not reconstruction. Given that, *Days of Heaven*'s direct reference to iconic American paintings works to darken the basic optimism ascribed to the prairie and the agricultural, striking the American Scene by exposing the extent to which its messages of ecological renewal and self-creation are vulnerable to capitalist modernity's economic and social violence. Case in point: the film's close-up shots of the boiler that powers a harvester's steam engine point up a direct link between the fields and the blast furnace. These are different kinds of extractive industries—monocrop wheat alongside steel—but the form of agriculture on display in the film joins the manufacture of steel under the aegis of industrial power and eco-engineering, for, as Rachel Carson once explained, "Single-crop farming does not take advantage of the principles by which nature works; it is agriculture as an engineer might conceive it to be."²⁸ When this fire finally consumes the Farmer's property, then, the scene stands as an exploration of the energies of industrial expansion spilling out of their containers, disordering the landscape. And the film's narrative offers not an elegy but the reenactment—both symbolic and actual—of murder.

Days of Heaven thus forms both an evocation and revision of the period, its attitudes, and the historical forces at work therein, using common images/moving images to signal an awareness of its own mythic valences. The title of a 1977 article by critic Roger Copeland analyzing a cinematic technique common to the era, from Woody Allen's *Play It Again, Sam* (1972) to Peter Bogdanovich's *Nickelodeon* (1976) to George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977), acts as an



Figure 1: Power House Mechanic Working on a Steam Pump, Lewis Hine, 1920.

appropriate description of Malick's film, released the following year: "When Films 'Quote' Films, They Create a New Mythology."²⁹ *Days of Heaven's* mingling of the historical, the fictional, and the mythic is apparent from the film's opening sequence: the credits appear over a series of turn-of-the-century photographs and a recording of a movement of Camille Saint-Saëns's "Carnival of the Animals," a combination of sound and sight that deliberately evokes a supernatural descent into the past as the eye of the camera glides along the photos, slowly, horizontally and vertically, zooming in and panning out, as they each dissolve and reemerge as new images. The result is a patchwork of disparate scenes, bound by nearly invisible seams, that create an atmosphere of otherworldliness-in-this-world, with no particular responsibility to sequential logic or chronology: Chansonetta Stanley Emmons's "Dorothy on the Rocks at Ugunquite, Maine, 1910" alongside H. H. Bennett's widely circulated 1886 picture of his son leaping across Stand Rock in the Wisconsin Dells; Lewis Hine's famous images of industrial workers, immigrants, and child laborers; a city-alley baseball game running up against a William Notman image of a late-nineteenth-century ice palace [Figure 2]. This is a realist fable, the sequence suggests, and these are the materials of which that long ago and far away consists. The final image in the series, a portrait of Linda by contemporary photographer Edie Baskin in the period style, is given voice when her narration breaks into the scene, such that the film allows the material remains of history—the photographs—to actually speak, kickstarting a narrative that will bring forth the material inequities responsible for so many of these iconic images [Figure 3]. It's clear from that early moment, then, that there's a whole image-bound genealogy being referenced, animated, and then unwritten throughout the film.

The film's soundscapes also encapsulates many of its thematic tensions. In its opening frames, prior to any dialogue, the first diegetic sound heard comes from two steady streams of water running off a factory downspout into a polluted ditch; the second major sonic incursion belongs to a roaring blast furnace. In both cases, the pictured human activities that accompany these sounds—gathering scrap metal, feeding coal into the furnace, even the quarrel that propels the film's plot—are scarcely audible. The same is true of the ways that human voices register in the film: they float as one frequently obscured part of a crowded atmosphere, and much of the narrative's indeterminacy derives from an inability to follow the voices. When the group first arrives at the Farmer's estate, a short reprieve of relative quiet greets them. As Bill, in a contemplative set piece, surveys the outer edges of the Farmer's property, viewers discern a range of subtle nonhuman sounds: the swishing of bison tails, the cry of a distant bird, a rustling wheat field; crickets, in a premonition of the finale, swell in and out of earshot. Yet once the harvest commences, the countryside sounds with as much industrial power as the city, as threshing machines drown out the sound of fleeing animals and, most aggressively of all, gas- and coal-powered tractors chug and stomp with preternatural authority.



Figure 2: Photograph of Linda by Edie Baskin, *Days of Heaven*, opening credits.

Nondiegetic sounds figure the film's larger themes as well. Italian composer Ennio Morricone, most widely recognized for his work in spaghetti westerns such as *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), provides the film's orchestral score, with a darkly melodic theme presses the plot forward at portentous moments. The soundtrack's fingerpicked guitar stylings come from Leo Kottke, who made his reputation in the early 1970s with reimagined, refracted explorations of American vernacular traditions, a sensibility that aligns with Malick's own in *Days of Heaven*. The buoyancy of Kottke's "Enderling" undergirds two key moments, with different inflections in each instance: first, when the group rides the train away from Chicago, on their way to the wheat fields, carried by the possibility of leaving the past behind; the song makes an ironic return when the group flees—this time by boat—the scene of the Farmer's murder. "Carnival of the Animals" and its descending figures repeat as well in the film's final moments, as Linda lowers herself from her boarding school window. The last words belong to her, and they address neither her own family nor the recent conflict that has shaped her future; she's ruminating on the fate of her unnamed friend ("this girl"): "I was hoping things would work out for her. She was a good friend of mine." If Linda's narration often makes it difficult to locate any stable narrative center or trajectory, it nevertheless stands as the most sonically distinguished, and distinguishable, voice in a film wherein human voices consistently compete with external sounds. The question such dynamics raise underlines the film's larger philosophical queries: what is the place of the human, of human culture, amid natural and/or industrial forces that sheer toward the uncontrollable? Whatever answers *Days of Heaven* may or may not provide, it's clear that the human presence is, both literally and figuratively, muted.



Figure 3: Harvest scene, *Days of Heaven*.

While the film is more straightforwardly oriented toward traditionally proportioned storytelling than Malick's most recent work, *Days of Heaven* never conforms to common expectations about exposition and cleanly delineated relationships of cause and effect.³⁰ In fact, its ability to hold discrete perspectives and experiences of time in suspension, without resolution, is as much a matter of theme as it is structure. According to Gilles Deleuze, the act of concurrently representing multiple temporalities produces a key innovation in the grammar of cinema, the "time-image"—a web of visual signs capable of at once encapsulating the past, the future, and the present. More broadly, *Days of Heaven*'s narrative architecture operates as a large-scale embodiment of the time-image since, as a reckoning of events that runs a basically linear-progressive formation up against the backward motion of Linda's flashback voiceover, the film stages a direct overlap of competing temporal registers. The technique is common enough—especially in midcentury noir films—yet there is a sharply avant-garde iteration of the time-image on display in the film that corresponds to Deleuze's vision of "modern cinema," one in which the role of the time-image shifts and the "sensory-motor schema . . . is shattered from the inside," resulting in a new condition in which "perceptions and actions ceased to be linked together, and spaces are now neither coordinated nor filled."³¹ So if Linda occasionally seems distant from the dramatic pulse of the film's action, one explanation is that she is simply acting out her inevitable role as a signing subject in the tangled, overrun networks of meaning generated by the modern cinema's time-image. Deleuze describes this phenomenon in language that captures the existential position of *Days of Heaven*'s human figures, who drift and crash amid soaring, wide-angle scenery: "Some characters, caught in certain pure optical and sound situations, find themselves condemned to wander about.

... These are pure seers, who no longer have the consolation of the sublime.”³² Appropriately enough, the characters who aren’t dead after the film’s jarring finale cannot resist the urge to wander, to court oblivion by rambling—as Linda escapes through the window of her boarding school and Abby boards a train taking soldiers off to war. “Where you going?” Linda asks her friend as they stumble down the railroad tracks at dawn in the film’s final scene: “For a walk. I don’t know where but . . .” It’s as complete an answer as the film provides.

While Linda’s ability to narrate isn’t entirely erased in the film’s explorations of pure sound and image, it is continually disrupted and inconsistently present: her voice drops in and out of the film just as her body itself remains offstage during key scenes, such as the climatic confrontation between the Farmer and Bill. In other words, the film’s frequent swerves away from the story—its readiness, in fact, to supplant plot development with image for image’s sake—offer Linda fewer opportunities to perform as an agent in the film’s fated sequence of events: at several stages, she feels less like an actor than—to borrow again from Deleuze—a “seer,” less like a participant than a witness to a spectacle that weaves together human and nonhuman dramas.

South by Great West

As I’ve suggested above, *Days of Heaven*’s depictions of the force and volatility boiling beneath the surface of the farm’s labor arrangements complicate popular images promoting the stasis—the “coherence,” to borrow Massey’s term—of the country districts. Yet according to James Gregory’s analysis of Dust Bowl migration in the 1930s, the “Western South enjoyed a history and tradition of mobility, of geographic and occupational fluidity.”³³ Although Gregory is primarily interested in the effects of migration on the creation of a distinct Okie culture in California, he’s getting at a key tension—mobility versus stasis—that informs the sociological dynamics of the region. Of course, the one character that never leaves his place is the Farmer. From a post on the hillside, propped up by a swelling bankroll, he alone can afford the luxury of fixity. So while mobility is often rightly hailed as a signal of personal autonomy, it is just as frequently a sign of insecurity and uncertainty—an observation nicely captured by the film’s emphasis on flowing bodies, carted back and forth by trains that the riders themselves cannot control.

Days of Heaven also subverts established notions of spatial coherence by locating a vibrant contact zone in the middle of a rural labor camp. With its mélange of immigrants and corners cluttered with imported goods, the areas in and around the Farmer’s house are marked by flows of capital labor and consumer products moving from the metropolis and beyond, with the railroad acting as the main artery of exchange. In an indication of the always-already transnational profile of the U.S. labor infrastructure, the screenplay explains that the “harvesters speak a Babel of tongues, from German to Uzbek to Swedish. Only English is rare.”³⁴ The seemingly remote camp comes to exemplify Mary Lou-

ise Pratt's contact zone, "a social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other."³⁵ Indeed, on one level, it's possible to read the narrative's entire conflict as a discordant union between representatives of the urban working class and the residue of a patrician agricultural tradition. For instance, when the Farmer first suspects something amiss in the brother-sister relationship of Bill and Abby, he forcefully confronts his wife: "I don't know how brothers and sisters act where you come from . . ." The implication, of course, is that a distance—differences of region and class—will always obtain between the Farmer and his wife. Although thrust into the same space, the barrier that adheres to their distinct histories is never allowed to fade. For this reason, when the truth becomes apparent, the Farmer primarily directs his irrepressible rage at Abby, the one who betrayed his trust by dissembling herself into a narrative of uplift in which she was plainly out of place. "You're a liar!" he screams while tying her to a column on the front porch, arresting her troubling mobility by binding her to his place, at the entrance of the baronial mansion. To read the film as a meditation on labor and landscape is to understand that the Farmer cannot accept his own attraction to, and intimacy with, an uncontained laboring body. His final, explosive response, in other words, is catalyzed by the sudden realization that Abby's role as a laborer, as *his* laborer, cannot be erased as she moves from his field to his bed.

In marked contrast to his impoverished workers, who demonstrate a basic healthfulness through their efforts in the fields, the Farmer is both the film's wealthiest and its sickliest character. It is only through contact with Abby, the Farmer's primary conduit to the earth itself, that he is revitalized, since the same structures that distance owners from the means and modes of production simultaneously exploit the workers and enervate the owner. The most obvious image here is of the Farmer reclining under a shaded canopy in the middle of a field while an accountant computes his earnings and the workers harvest the crops. His position as the owner has isolated him from all forms of labor: there's the foreman to manage the fields, the accountant to tend to the numbers, and a whole flock of workers to handle the wheat. It may be true, as Lloyd Michaels suggests, that the film doesn't offer a simplistic picture of "the Farmer as an insensitive capitalist tyrant or the migrant workers as oppressed victims."³⁶ But even the romantic triangle that propels the film's action is one that hinges on the kinds of work these different bodies perform, and there's something about the arrangement of labor and capital on the farm that makes its ultimate implosion inevitable.

Accordingly, the film both reaffirms the value of labor and records acute anxiety about the values of industrialization. That combination leads Adrian Martin to consider the influence of Malick's time as a student of Heidegger: throughout *Days of Heaven*, according to Martin, there exists a persistent impression that "there is no pure Being, only the action of hands upon the world, fashioning (for better or worse) a living space, a temporary arrangement of people and materials."³⁷ Heidegger might also provide a key to understanding

the film as a discourse on a decidedly antimodern strain of modern thought. In an essay explaining his decision to decline an academic post at the University of Berlin, Heidegger explains that his work, his philosophy, is “intimately rooted in and related to the lives of the peasants,” a group that steadfastly resists the intrusions of “citified officiousness.”³⁸ The philosopher stands at odds with the brand of modernity flowing out from the city, finding instead a more “authentic” mode of being in rural dwellers with an ostensibly closer relationship to the land itself.³⁹ Similarly, in *Days of Heaven*’s restaging—and eventual unwriting—of the Antaeus myth, it is through contact with the earth, in some Heideggerian manner of autochthony, that one is most fully nourished. Paradoxically, however, the land also becomes a source of dissolution. By tracing the contours of a personal, ecological, and cultural apocalypse, the film finally encourages viewers to recognize signs of resistance to the ways in which modernization-via-industrialization alienates agricultural laborers and transforms their practices. Although the “traditional” farmer of the recent past remains a vanished presence throughout the film, *Days of Heaven* aims to make the invisible visible by recasting situational violence as a form of structural violence, one that undergirds the systems of industrial-scale agriculture that filled the absent farmer’s void.

While the film is technically set in the former Confederacy—at one of antebellum slavery’s most far-flung outposts, just below the 36°30’ mark set by the Missouri Compromise—its preoccupation with vast horizons and one-on-one confrontation tends toward the filmic vocabulary of the Western. As I’ve intimated above, however, *Days of Heaven* just as frequently, although not uncomplicatedly, tropes the South. For instance, in allowing the voice of Linda—a working-class orphan from the slums of Chicago—to tell about the South, the film engages in a dynamic act of regional and historical crossing: she is an uninitiated guide to the southwestern landscape, and so the “southernness” of the southwestern edge of the Great Prairies is only subtly brought into view.⁴⁰ Consequently, in its intraregional scope the film seems to anticipate Massey’s rejection of a “coherent region” in favor of spaces transected, and marked, by intercultural crossings. Yet “the South” remains an essential character in the film’s dramatic structure since so much of the action takes place against a backdrop of labor practices and cultural codes with plainly southern inflections.

Further, *Days of Heaven* engages “the South” in its depictions of a curious alternate account of race and counter-migration. As African Americans fled the post-Reconstruction South of the Nadir and settled in upriver midwestern cities such as Chicago, many urban whites—often first-generation immigrants—pushed away from the urban centers and into the Midwest, the West, and out along the edges of the South, such as the Panhandle. In keeping with the general westerling movements of U.S. history, southerners and their attendant culture landed in points west.⁴¹ And so in the western region of the westernmost “southern” state, legacies of southern history and culture assert themselves in unanticipated ways. These appearances, however, are unmoored from any particular

geographic coordinates. Often as not they register aurally, in the film's diegetic soundscapes: the priest, for instance, dedicates the harvest in an unmistakable southern accent; a Cajun-inflected Doug Kershaw song plays a key role in the post-harvest party, as does a country blues harmonica. The result is a portrait of a South of suggestion and remnant, of compressed and overlapping micro-regions—a multiple and migrant South. It is, in fact, a transregional South, triangulated against the midwestern prairies and Chicago, and forming something close to what Lewis Simpson provocatively labeled the “postsouth.”⁴²

And yet stubborn, historically specific signifiers of the “South” persist. As I've argued above, perhaps the most obvious shadow of the region and its history appears in the presence of an extensive body of workers who toil under the rule of a single white man up in the big house. This connection deepens when it becomes clear how frequently non-whiteness, “blackness” even, operates, to use Stuart Hall's formulation, as a floating signifier that occasionally hovers above the bodies of working-class Euro-American immigrants as well.⁴³ Eric Lott, in his celebrated discussion of minstrelsy, described a logic that “equated working-classness with blackness as often as it differentiated between them,” an observation that adds significance to the moment of mutual identification that springs up between Linda and the African American dancer—each of whom performs the sort of step that gained currency in minstrelsy.⁴⁴ (The dancer acknowledges their class kinship, as well as the cultural kinship between the industrial centers of the Midwest and the diasporic South, when he encourages Abby by exclaiming, “Chicago! Well, go ahead!”) With its attention to cross-racial recognition, the scene ultimately displays what Lott identifies as the “minstrel show's cognitive equation of [the] black and white working class.”⁴⁵ The dance is being expropriated, signified upon, and shared across racial boundaries—and it is also one of the most directly communicative moments in a narrative centrally concerned with the limits and failures of human communication. The dancer's self-conscious evocation of the codes of Jim Crow is clear in the way that he slyly deploys them, and Linda's nimble adoption of the same codes solidifies the pair's kinship. Of course, it's telling that a young working-class girl is the one to initiate the communicative dance: with nominally less to lose than her adult counterparts (and under the cover of adolescence), Linda intuitively grasps and embraces the connection between herself and the black dancer.

It's possible, from this angle, to perceive the Foreman's relentless skepticism about Bill and Abby as the expression of a phenomenon that historian Joel Williamson identifies as the “continuous quest for invisible blackness, the steady distrust of the alien, and the ready belief in the existence of the enemy hidden within.” The result, which Williamson claims in a deliberate echo of Richard Hofstadter, is a “distinctly paranoid style.”⁴⁶ Although the adviser's paranoia might ultimately be justified, it's clear throughout that he feels obligated to mind the gap between the Farmer and creeping working-classness, a loose equivalent to blackness.

The film's take on the practice and theory of the agrarianism in the early twentieth century also underscores its southern concerns, as its attention to the effects of industrialization on the culture of agriculture crosses over into the ground of the Nashville Agrarians—the coalition of artists and intellectuals active in the 1930s that imagined a deliberately agricultural and consequently “southern” response to the rise of urban industrialism. In a piece roughly coeval to *Days of Heaven*—the introduction to a 1977 edition that brought the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) back into print—prominent southernist Louis Rubin holds that the group would be aghast at a postmodern South wherein the “rural hinterlands have been bound into the complexities of an industrial society to a degree that had thoroughly blurred the once sharp distinction between countryside and city.”⁴⁷ The reinforcement of the urban-rural binary in Rubin's introduction essentially takes the Agrarians at their word, but, as its close contemporary *Days of Heaven* argues, the city and the country were never so easily distinguished; although their dispersal was frequently uneven, the processes of modernization and development always bled out into the “hinterlands,” resulting in an uneasy tangle of machine and nature.

Though it takes a more nuanced view of the relationship between the country and the city, Malick's film ultimately upholds several central Agrarian protests. For instance, the film's depictions of the plight of migrant workers is of a piece with the description of the “modern laborer” in John Crowe Ransom's “Statement of Principles”: “His labor is hard, its tempo fierce, and his employment is insecure.”⁴⁸ Likewise the film is steadfastly skeptical of the human and environmental consequences of large-scale, industrial-strength agriculture. For his part, Michaels optimistically holds that in its depiction of “the receding railroad tracks meld[ing] with the farmlands at dawn,” the film presents a “synthesis” of the industrial and the agricultural.⁴⁹ While it's certainly true, as I've been arguing all along, that these two elements can never be separated in total, to call the troubled relationship between industry and agriculture that emerges after the film's final scenes a synthesis feels a bit too bland; their confluence is unordered, explosive, and, in the case of the Farmer and Bill, ultimately deadly.

At the conclusion of his landmark analysis of urban and rural forms in British literature and culture, Raymond Williams surveyed the tenacity of “the ideas and the images of country and city,” highlighting a “need to trace, historically and critically, the various forms of the ideas” despite a wide-scale transformation of their fundamental relationships.⁵⁰ *Days of Heaven*'s general readiness to promote a kind of post-Agrarian agrarianism, what Janet Fiskio calls the “New Agrarianism,” serves as both a mark of its late-twentieth-century provenance and an oblique comment on its engagement with discourses of region and regionalism.⁵¹ In this regard, the film has a natural ally in the figure of Wendell Berry.⁵² In 1977, just a year before the release of *Days of Heaven*, and the same year that Louis Rubin reintroduced *I'll Take My Stand*, the Sierra Club published Berry's most sustained agrarian manifesto, *The Unsettling of America*. While there's no evidence to support a causative relationship between the two

texts, it's safe to say that the ideas developed in Berry's book had cultural currency in the late 1970s. (There is at least one direct link between the two: decades later, in 2016, Malick served as executive producer of Laura Dunn and Jef Sewall's documentary film *Look & See: A Portrait of Wendell Berry*.) *Days of Heaven* picks up these currents and channels them through a narrative that details a transformative period in the development of the practices and scales of American agriculture. The late 1970s represent another such transitional moment, nicely summarized by Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz's famous admonition to farmers during his tenure in the Nixon Administration: "Get big or get out." For Berry, this pivot from small-scale, traditional farms to massive holdings cultivated by machines and underwritten by corporations is a lamentable turn in the state of farming, but it also evokes a broader human problem:

Once, the governing human metaphor was pastoral or agricultural, and it clarified, and so preserved in human care, the natural cycles of birth, growth, death, and decay. But modern humanity's governing metaphor is that of the machine. . . . We began to see the whole Creation merely as raw material, to be transformed by machines into a manufactured Paradise.⁵³

It's obvious, as his accountant confirms, that the Farmer is the "richest man in the Panhandle" because he has the most land, commands the greatest body of laborers, and has the most efficient machines. And the finished film's visual attention to large-scale agricultural machines is indicated in the detailed stage direction of the original screenplay, which specifies the types ("a mowing machine called a binder"), brands ("[a] Case tractor—forty tons of iron, steam-driven, and powerful as a locomotive"), and functions ("[s]ixty foot belts connect the tractor to the separating machines, huge rattletrap devices that shell the wheat out at deafening volume") of its machinated props.⁵⁴ It's also clear that the Farmer's attempts to "manufacture Paradise" extend into his personal life as well, in his decision to assume a kind of ownership of Abby and her history—and this is a tendency that the film rewards with a fiery cataclysm.

As with his forbearers in the 1930s, it's easy to dismiss Berry's agrarian thinking is often dismissed as overly romantic, but the varieties of agrarianism that have emerged in his wake deserve some attention.⁵⁵ Similarly, *Days of Heaven* registers a palpable unease about industry and technology in a way that reverberates through an array of contemporary underground and alternative food movements. These loosely affiliated groups and individuals are bound by an attempt to shift the balance from an economy of consumption to one of production and have drawn a wide swath of people, have found place in a catholic set of ideologies: urban farming, the "opportunivore" movement, freeganism, and localism being just a few examples.⁵⁶

Yet this connection between the disappearance of a small-scale farming economy and modernity/modernism isn't a subject of A/agrarians alone. In the

modes of agriculture presented in *Days of Heaven*, we see the onset of a process that, in Jameson's bleak—and much-cited—prediction, ultimately yields the postmodern landscape: “One way of telling the story of the transition from the modern to the postmodern lies then in showing how at length modernization triumphs and . . . nature is abolished along with the traditional countryside and traditional agriculture.”⁵⁷ While the full complexity of the signifier “nature” isn't fully present in Jameson's statement, and although *Days of Heaven* can't finally answer questions about the abolishment of nature in the late twentieth century, it does dramatize a major turn in the development of modern agriculture and its effects on the nonhuman. With its penetrating look to the past, *Days of Heaven* seeks to map the origins of this transition.

It's also possible here to note that these spatio-economic connections parallel the film's troubles with periodicity. A reading of Malick's film exposes the consequences of rurality's persistent mobilization in U.S. arts—“The pastoral ideal,” Leo Marx argued at the outset of *The Machine in the Garden*, “has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery”⁵⁸—just as it allows us to consider how conventional approaches to chronology, periodization, and categorization (e.g., modernism, postmodernism) might tend to obscure important continuities and forestall useful conclusions. If *Days of Heaven* is routinely referenced as a “postmodern” work, I hope to have shown the extent to which its material, aesthetic, and philosophical contexts demonstrate that the new of the postmodern is already inextricably embedded in the new of the modern. Such distinctions matter in a narrative committed to overturning common conceptions about the regenerative possibilities of the agricultural frontier-as-New World, what Henry Nash Smith famously called the “myth of the garden.”⁵⁹

The rural presence of creatively destructive modernization also offers a frame through which to understand the final, fatal encounter between the Farmer and Bill. Industrialism and its machines of standardized parts put tools such as screwdrivers in the hands of more and more people during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Appropriately enough, this common tool becomes the weapon that Bill uses, in a fit of self-defense, to impale the Farmer. Though less obvious—and considerably grimmer—this is a gesture as loaded against the dehumanizing effects of industrialization as is the journey of Chaplin's factory worker through the cogs and gears of the giant machine in *Modern Times*. But, in contrast to Chaplin's, it's not an action that occurs along the front line of any modernist response to industrialism.⁶⁰ Coming from a film released in the late 1970s, the act in *Days of Heaven* is a repetition, with the difference appearing as increased violence and an eye toward the vacuity of the familiar pastoral myths. Here arrives the impossibility in this film of ever escaping the grasp of what Marx identifies as “the protean conflict figured by the machine's increasing domination of the visible world,” a dynamic illustrated in the harvest scenes, wherein machines crowd nearly everything else out of the frame [Figure 4].⁶¹ The film's attention to ecological disturbance scales down to the

individual human, of course, but also up to the eco-planetary, as the implements on display in the film—the “rakes and flails” mentioned in the screenplay, as well as the threshing machines and tractors—act as ominous metonyms of the plow that broke the plains in the 1930s.⁶² It’s a standard narrative now, but when farmers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries stripped out the prairie grasses that held the region’s topsoil to construct the large-scale, monocrop wheat fields on display in *Days of Heaven*, they set the stage for the environmental and economic catastrophe of the North American Dust Bowl.⁶³

Though it clearly evokes myths of the pastoral, the film is ultimately committed to evacuating them, particularly as they relate to the redemptive potential of romance, violence, domesticity, and the frontier. With the male protagonists killed in the fury, the film cuts loose Linda and Abby, scattering them across a nameless, placeless locale. Even this move of separation, however, carries a revisionary stress mark: unlike Huck Finn or Ishmael or Natty Bumpo or any of the other usual suspects in masculinist American wandering, it is ultimately the women who light out, once again, for the territory. There are, however, no illusions about the simple matter of space and freedom to traverse it: Abby is last seen in the company of a group of soldiers heading off to war at the back of a caboose; Linda’s final scene shows her following the line of the railroad tracks. Each is more or less contained, enclosed, and guided by the rails. In the end, perhaps the best way to understand the romantic turbulence that spins apart the overlapping worlds of the Farmer and Bill-Linda-Abby is as the cover of a churning, unnavigable conflict between labor and capital, between the dusk of yeomanry and the dawn of mechanization. Likewise, as the film brings issues of race and/or cultural difference to bear on a “pastoral ideal” that has often lacked such awareness—in both the myth-and-symbol school of the mid-20th century and in the historiographical turn of the late twentieth century—it also invites a meditation on similar lacunae frequently perceived in contemporary alternative food movements, what one recent commentator has called their “unbearable whiteness.”⁶⁴ The pastoral still calls—but the garden’s bounties have been, and continue to be, inconsistently distributed.

In 1991, nearly a decade and a half after the premiere of Malick’s film, William Cronon earned acclaim for shedding new light on the mutually constitutive links between the natural resources of the Great West—wheat, lumber, and meat—and the rise of the great interior metropolis Chicago, “eras[ing] the false boundary” presumed to obtain between the country and the city.⁶⁵ Cronon’s analysis invites us, again, to think about scalar relationships: folding individuated landowners and laborers into macro-orders of regional, national, and continental core and periphery. For its part, *Days of Heaven*’s portrayal of a trade route in reverse—one that utilizes the rails to bring laborers in and haul crops out—anticipates Cronon’s account, imagining how, through contingencies of mobility, ecology, and technology, the same body that fells a factory foreman in Chicago precipitates the destruction of an agricultural dynasty in northern Texas.⁶⁶ And in a 21st century moment that considers the possibilities of ris-

ing agropolitical action, Malick's meditation on a farm gone wrong creates a startling series of images—highly stylized, arrestingly resonant, unexpectedly prescient.

Notes

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1. Pauline Kael, *5001 Nights at the Movies* (New York: Holt, 1991), 447; Dave Kehr, "Review: *Days of Heaven*," *Chicago Reader*, 1978, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/days-of-heaven/Film?oid=1056586>, accessed March 6, 2018; Harold Schonberg, "Review: *Days of Heaven*," *New York Times*, September 14, 1978; The "greatest film ever made" is from Nick Schanger, "Film Review: *Days of Heaven*," *Slant Magazine*, October 22, 2007, accessed March 6, 2018, <https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/days-of-heaven>.
2. Two articles in this vein are Charlotte Croft, "'From the Hegemony of the Eye' to the 'Hierarchy of Perception': The Reconfiguration of Sound and Image in Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven*," *Journal of Media Practice* 2, no. 1 (2002): 19–29; and Hubert Cohen, "The Genesis of *Days of Heaven*," *Cinema Journal* 22, no. 4 (2002): 46–62.
3. Maria Farland, "Modernist Versions of Pastoral: Poetic Inspiration, Scientific Expertise, and the 'Degenerate' Farmer," *American Literary History* 19, no. 4 (2007): 930.
4. Two recent studies that explore the myth of the garden with an enlarged scope and updated set of concerns are George Handley, *New World Poetics: Nature and the Adamic Imagination of Whitman, Neruda, and Walcott* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007) and Zachary Hutchins, *Inventing Eden: Primitivism, Millennialism, and the Making of New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
5. Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and US Nationalism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 7.
6. Terrence Malick, *Days of Heaven*, unpublished film script, 13, accessed March 6, 2018, http://www.pages.drexel.edu/~ina22/splaylib/Screenplay-Days_of_Heaven.pdf. This version of the script bears the revision date June 2, 1976.
7. Doreen Massey, *for space* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 97.
8. Two foundational explorations of the modern and the urban include Walter Benjamin's work on Baudelaire and Paris ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 155–200; "Paris the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *Illuminations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 146–62) and Georg Simmel's "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *Blackwell City Reader*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 12–19.
9. Massey, *for space*, 97.
10. See, for instance, Janet Casey, *A New Heartland: Women, Modernity, and the Agrarian Ideal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Benjamin Child, *Uneven Ground: Figurations of the Rural Modern in the US South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, forthcoming); Farland, "Modernist Versions of Pastoral"; Jolene Hubbs, "William Faulkner's Rural Modernism," *Mississippi Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2008): 461–75.
11. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "agribusiness" first appeared in print in a 1955 edition of *Harvard Business School Bulletin* (autumn 41) and entered the American lexicon in the decades that followed.
12. Ben McCann, "'Enjoying the Scenery': Landscape and the Fetishisation of Nature in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*," *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, ed. Hannah Patterson (New York: Wallflower Press, 2003), 77.
13. As Tony Judt has declared, "More than any other technical design or social institution, the railway stands for modernity." Judt, "The Glory of the Rails," *New York Review of Books*, December 23, 2010, 60. The railroad also plays a vital role in William Cronon's landmark account of the agricultural hinterland's vital connections to the rise of modern Chicago. See his *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 55–96.
14. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 174.
15. Malick, *Days of Heaven*, 10.
16. See Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), and Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). See also Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014). Although their unit of labor is best measured in days rather than weeks, it's worth noting that their wage (three dollar a day) seems a fairly generous

wage for 1916. Pete Daniel quotes a Federal Emergency Relief Administration report that estimated the average yearly wage of a New Deal-era tenant farmer in Meriwether County, Georgia, at \$75 a year. Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 82. Even worse is the condition of countless sharecroppers from the same place and time who ended each harvest season in debt.

17. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 21.
18. *Ibid.*, 21.
19. *Ibid.*, 4.
20. Nestor Almendros, *A Man with a Camera*, trans. Rachel Phillips Belash (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1984), 169.
21. Joanna Mancini, *American Literary History* 16, no. 2 (summer 2004): 223. Mancini's essay "'Messin' with the Furniture Man': Early Country Music, Regional Culture, and the Search for an Anthropological Modernism" offers a probing description of old-time country music of the 1920s and 1930s and its participation in cultures of modernization and modernism.
22. David Denby, "Down in the Dumps in Texas," *New York*, November 19, 1984, 53.
23. Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 2.
24. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1992), 30.
25. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217–52.
26. Grant Wood, "Revolt Against the City," reprinted in Joseph S. Czeszchowski, *John Stuart Curry and Grant Wood: A Portrait of Rural America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981), 131.
27. *Ibid.*, 130.
28. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002), 10.
29. Roger Copeland, "When Films 'Quote' Films, They Create a New Mythology," *New York Times*, September 25, 1977.
30. Most of Malick's work in the twenty-first century—*Tree of Life* (2011), *To the Wonder* (2013), *Knight of Cups* (2015), and *Song to Song* (2017)—whittles narrative down to its most essential elements, frequently offering just a sketch of a plot alongside rangy explorations of philosophical abstractions via sound and image.
31. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 40–41.
32. *Ibid.*, 41.
33. James Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 29.
34. Malick, *Days of Heaven*, 8.
35. Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone" *Profession 91* (New York: MLA, 1991), 34.
36. Lloyd Michaels, *Terrence Malick* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 41.
37. Adrian Martin, "On Earth as It Is in Heaven," *Days of Heaven*, DVD booklet (New York: Criterion, 2009), 11.
38. Martin Heidegger, "Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?," in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*, ed. Thomas Sheehan (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1981), 28–29.
39. Of course, the dangers of such thinking are plain to contemporary commentators, who often argue that this same interest in a "grounded" civilization led to Heidegger's early support for German National Socialism. For a perceptive reading of the Heidegger problem, see Dominick LaCapra's *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 90–148.
40. Fred Hobson's famous examination of the "southern rage to explain" stipulates that the telling be done by southerners, a tactic *Days of Heaven* sidesteps. See Hobson, *Tell about the South: The Southern Rage to Explain* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998).
41. James Gregory's *Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) offers a rich overview of the variegated trajectories that led southerners out of the region.
42. For the earliest presentation of the "postsouthern," see Simpson's "The Closure of History in a Postsouthern America," in *The Brazen Face of History: Studies in the Literary Consciousness of America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 255–76. Further elaboration is offered by Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); Scott Romine, "Where Is Southern Literature? The Practice of Place in a Postsouthern Age," in *South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 23–43; Martyn Bone, *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).
43. Stuart Hall, *Race: The Floating Signifier*, dir. Sut Jhally (Media Foundation, 1996).

44. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 71.
45. *Ibid.*, 70.
46. Joel Williamson, *A Rage for Order: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 238.
47. Louis Rubin, "Introduction," in *Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), xiii.
48. John Crowe Ransom, "Statement of Principles," in *I'll Take My Stand*, ix.
49. Michaels, *Terence Malick*, 55.
50. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 289–90.
51. Janet Fiskio, "Unsettling Ecocriticism: Rethinking Agrarianism, Place, and Citizenship," *American Literature* 84, no. 2 (2012): 302.
52. Zackary Vernon has recently discussed Wendell Berry's relationship to the troubled legacies of Nashville Agrarians in "The Problematic History and Recent Cultural Reappropriation of Southern Agrarianism," *ISLE* 21, no. 2 (spring 2014): 337–52.
53. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 56.
54. Malick, *Days of Heaven*, 13, 23.
55. Berry's influence on the current crop of food activists is unmistakable. Michael Pollan, in particular, has been loudly appreciative. See Pollan, "Wendell Berry's Wisdom," *The Nation*, September 2, 2009, 29–31.
56. Burkhard Bilger's profile of the radical agrarian Sandor Katz, himself a denizen of a gay farming commune in the wilds of Tennessee, identifies the diversity of his followers: "Some identify themselves as punks, others as hippies, others as evangelical Christians; some live rustically as homesteaders—the 'techno peasantry,' they call themselves; others are thoroughly plugged in." Bilger, "Nature's Spoils," *New Yorker*, November 22, 2010, 104.
57. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 311.
58. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 3.
59. "The myth of the garden" acts as a guiding trope in the final section of Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1950), 123–262.
60. Chaplin, like Griffith, is an abiding presence throughout the film. His 1917 feature *The Immigrant* is screened during an important sequence that highlights Abby's willing embrace of the luxuries of the Farmer's home. Likewise, in the original screenplay Bill is described as a figure "like Chaplin" (5).
61. Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 364.
62. Malick, *Days of Heaven*, 17.
63. The allusion here is to Pare Lorentz's documentary *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), one of the earliest and most influential examinations of the human contribution to the Dust Bowl disaster. See also Donald Worster's classic study *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains of the 1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 65–98. There's another layer of geographic specificity to the film's depictions of farming machines. According to Pete Daniel's incisive work on the mechanization of American agriculture, farmers in the Texas Panhandle were among the first to transition away from hand labor. "Oklahoma, Texas, and the Mississippi Delta mechanized first," Daniel explains, citing the region's relatively flat topography and its lack of a stable labor force as important causes. See Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 241.
64. See, for instance, Julie Guthman, "'If They Only Knew': The Unbearable Whiteness of Alternative Food," in *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*, ed. Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyem (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 263–82. In 1931, a full generation before the appearance of any of the classic myth-and-symbol studies mentioned in the introduction, Constance Rourke's *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2004) proposed a triune formation of national mythic figures: the Yankee, the backwoodsman, and the minstrel. The crude navigation of racial difference was, of course, the whole occasion for the kinds of minstrelsy Rourke investigated. See Rourke, *American Humor*, 70–90.
65. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 19.
66. In order to highlight the centrality of industrialized labor, Malick adjusts particular details of the original screenplay: where the script put Bill on the run after a broken burglary, for instance, the impetus in the finished film is the fight with the foreman.