

***Sympathy for a Serial Killer:  
Malick's Badlands, Visual Metaphor, and Frankfurt's Concept of a Person***

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Many creatures exhibit desires of various strengths competing with one another for the prize of interacting with beliefs to cause behaviour. Harry Frankfurt famously analyzes persons in terms of the ability to form second-order desires, desires that intervene in this economy of first-order desires in ways that sometimes award the prize to weaker competitors. This paper augments Frankfurt's analysis with Kendall Walton's understanding of pretense behaviour and then interprets the central metaphors in several films by Terrence Malick in terms of this augmented analysis. The result is an understanding of those films as investigations into personhood and factors that inhibit attempts to manifest it. Along the way, the discussion touches on the relation between linguistic and visual metaphor, the potentially ethical character of art, and the question of whether a valid interpretation must be congruent with the actual communicative intentions of the artist.

[The concept of a person is] designed to capture those attributes which are the subject of our most humane concern with ourselves and the source of what we regard as most important and most problematical in our lives.  
(Frankfurt, 1971, p. 6)

It might have been expected that no problem would be of more central and persistent concern to philosophers than that of understanding what we ourselves essentially are.  
(Frankfurt, 1971, p. 6)

A memorable scene in Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973) is that of the co-protagonist Kit Carruthers (Martin Sheen) standing in the titular Badlands of Montana watching a moonrise, the rifle with which he has murdered several people over his shoulders, his arms slung limply across. Kit is a scarecrow, a figure that appears to be a person but is in fact not, a fitting metaphor, as his initial appearance as a handsome, charismatic young man gives way,

over the course of the film, to the reality that he lacks the sorts of attributes that Frankfurt seeks in his classic investigation into personhood. Kit begins the film by getting fired from his job as a trash collector, meets Holly Sargis (Sissy Spacek), the 15-year-old co-protagonist, murders her father, burns her home and takes her on flight from the law that involves hiding out in a tree fort by a river, six more murders, a home invasion and then weeks of meandering across the Badlands in a stolen car. Once apprehended, he carries himself as though he were a Hollywood celebrity rather than the serial killer he in fact is. It is hard not to conclude that, from start to finish, Kit is void of qualities central to “our most humane concern with ourselves” (Frankfurt, 1971, p. 6).

Such character stasis constitutes an effective ground against which Malick situates the dynamic figure of Holly. The opening scene shows her in her bedroom petting her dog, the camera dollying to reveal her pet fish, dollhouse and doll, all markers of childhood, but each one that is soon taken away, her dog shot, her fish discarded and her dollhouse and doll consumed by flames. While initially enthralled by Kit, who looks “just like James Dean” (*Badlands*, 0:08:27) she gradually comes to realize that there is “something wrong with his bean” (*Badlands*, 0:58:14). Finally, as a police helicopter approaches, Holly sees her chance to escape and surrenders while Kit continues in the car. Holly is shown ascending in the helicopter as a choir sings fortissimo on the soundtrack, an ascension from childhood into personhood standing in stark contrast with Kit’s static scarecrow outside of it.

While such a figure-ground study may be a plausible interpretation of a screenplay written by a philosopher with concern for “what we regard as most important and most problematical in our lives,” (Frankfurt, 1971, p. 6) I have come to reject it or, at least, one

half of it. I accept that Holly is a dynamic character but reject the idea that Kit is a static character. Instead, I now see Holly and Kit as being on par in terms of dynamism but differing in their direction of movement along the axis of personhood. Whereas Holly begins the film as a child and develops into a person, Kit begins the film as a person but then, due to triggering events, regresses into a childhood, with their two characters passing in opposite directions roughly at the midpoint of the film. In this way the screenplay is a study, not only in the development of the attributes that Frankfurt seeks, but as well the conditions corrosive of such attributes, complexities of “central and persistent concern” (Frankfurt, 1971, p. 6) to a philosopher who has recently turned his back on academia to become a screenwriter-director, as Malick had in the years during which the film was conceived (Tucker, T.D. and Kendall, S., 2011, p. 5).

### **1. Persons**

Many living things have the capacity to represent, not only how the world is, but as well how they want it to become. They have, in other words, beliefs and desires, states of mind that interact causally to produce behaviour. Desires come in various strengths and often conflict, so that which desire moves a creature to action on an occasion—which becomes what Frankfurt calls the “effective” (1971, p. 8) desire—will be a product of an economy of competing desires. Such is the condition of most, but not all, creatures possessing beliefs and desires. A subset of such creatures also have the capacity to form desires about which of their desires will be effective. Such second-order desires have the potential to intervene in the economy of first-order desires and cause some, but not others, to be effective

notwithstanding their relative strengths (Frankfurt 1971, pp. 6-7). When a creature has the second-order desire that a particular first-order desire be effective that creature has a second-order *volition* (Frankfurt 1971, p. 10). Creatures lacking such volitions, either because their cognitive architecture does not permit the formation of second-order desires, or because it does but they fail to realize its potential, are *wantons* (Frankfurt 1971, p. 11). It is the possession of second-order volitions that is the essence of personhood on Frankfurt's analysis, and so wantons are, by definition, not persons.

Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927) illustrates a transition from wanton to person. A quasi-autobiographical work, the author, in the guise of the narrator, recalls his life from boyhood to middle age, ending when he realizes that his vocation is to write the novel itself. The story begins with the young narrator lying in bed while his parents entertain guests downstairs, his behaviour in the grip of a first-order desire for a good-night kiss from his mother. He later develops the desire to be a writer, but the subsequent volumes show it trammelled amidst a *laissez-faire* economy of various competing desires, including those for the love of various young women and for entree into aristocratic society. Such wanton behaviour is exhibited in amplified form by other central characters, most clearly the eligible bachelor Swann, whose desire for courtesan Odette results in an unhappy marriage, and the aristocratic Charlus, whose promiscuity eventuates in his ostracism. In the concluding pages, however, the narrator forms the second-order desire that his first-order desire to be a writer become effective, proof of the success of which readers hold in their hands. Avoiding the fates of Swann and Charlus, the narrator comes to manifest personhood.

Frankfurt's analysis of personhood sets the bar so high that few human beings manifest the characteristic in any consistent way. His conception is thus distinct from alternative conceptions invoked in fields such as bioethics, where exemplification of personhood must be a routine matter for most human beings. Such exclusive status is, however, a virtue of Frankfurt's conception in relation to Malick's screenplays, as it is evident from their tenor that Malick takes as his subject matter a rare, fragile quality, one that must be nurtured if it is to be exemplified.

## **2. Preliminaries: Methodology, Ethics and Metaphor**

It is possible that Malick had Frankfurt's work in mind when writing the screenplay for *Badlands*. Malick studied philosophy at both the undergraduate and graduate levels during the mid 1960s (Tucker, T.D. and Kendall, S., 2011, p. 5). Although Frankfurt's paper did not appear in print until early 1971, it is characteristic of academic publishing that the ideas informing a paper circulate in the years before they are finalized in a journal. Given Frankfurt's high profile it would not be surprising if Malick had encountered Frankfurt's ideas in typescript or at a conference.

Regardless, my aim is to furnish an interpretation of Malick's screenplay that finds its value, not necessarily in the discovery of his actual communicative intentions, but rather in the attribution of what Jerry Fodor calls a "virtual intentional etiology" (1993, p. 51). On Fodor's analysis, an artwork is an artifact with a structure that is "compatible with its having been made with the primary intention that it produce a certain effect on its audience, and that it be recognized by its audience as intended to produce that effect" (1993, p. 51). Given

the requirement for such recognition, the audience must examine structural features of an artwork under consideration and then hypothesize primary communicative intentions compatible with them. But adjudication between such hypotheses is less a matter of a match with the actual intentions of the artist than it is a matter of attributing intentions that interestingly supervene on those structural features, and that deal with a rich and relevant topic in a revelatory way.

A film about a serial killer points in the direction of ethical considerations, but an interpretation as a moral indictment of Kit's actions would be insubstantial, as those actions are obviously unethical. That said, if Fodor's analysis has merit, it is in part because it builds an ethical component into the practice of *art*, and it is at this meta-level that substantial ethical considerations come into play. Fodor distinguishes between art and advertising. While these practices have in common that one party intends to effect changes in the cognitive status of another, they are distinct at least insofar as, in instances of the former, success in effecting the desired changes is not sufficient for success in the practice overall. Instead, for such success the audience must recognize that they are being enjoined to accept the (real or virtual) communicative intentions of the artist. Such recognition, in turn, is a matter of the above-mentioned formation of, and adjudication between, hypotheses about those communicative intentions. Because recognition, understood in this way, is a highly cognitive process, it is one that exercises a human capacity that is at the heart of the Kantian ethical framework broadly understood. Whereas in successful advertising all parties may treat one another as means, in successful art all parties must treat one another as ends, and it is in this respect that successful art is necessarily ethical.

Such an ethical requirement places substantial onuses on both artist and audience. The (real or virtual) artist must imbue their work with sufficient structure to lay the basis for the audience to form and adjudicate between hypotheses, and the audience must reciprocate by actually doing so. In what follows, I attempt to discharge the latter onus by bringing Frankfurt's analysis of personhood, augmented by Kendall Walton's analysis of pretense behaviour, together with an analysis of visual metaphor in ways that yield metaphorical interpretations of plot elements in *Badlands* and two other Malick films. I believe that these interpretations fare well in terms of revealing richness and relevance. If they also match Malick's actual communicative intentions, so much the better.

According to Amy Coplan, "before we begin theorizing at a high level about philosophical themes, meanings, and messages in a film, we must get clearer about the film's form and how it influences viewers' attention, perception, and feelings" (2009, pp. 65-66). She adds that "this is especially true of Malick's films, which are more cinematic than most because they foreground features of experience that can only be communicated through appeal to the senses" (2009, p. 65).

I agree that, especially with Malick's films, the phenomenology of engagement tends to follow the affective-then-cognitive temporal order. Upon first viewing, one is left largely with a bundle of experiences capped by a sense of bafflement with regard to communicative intentions. It is only later, after reflection and subsequent viewings, that one generates with confidence hypotheses about Malick's engagement with his audience in cognitive terms. But I resist Coplan's assumption that this phenomenology is a reliable guide to the actual character of our cognitive engagement with films generally, and Malick's films

in particular. Instead, our cognitive engagement takes initially as its raw material, not the affective states engendered by viewing a film, but rather the numerous *propositional attitudes* and their contents (paradigmatically beliefs in the case of documentary films and imaginings in the case of fictional films) so engendered.<sup>1</sup> It is on the basis of these that the cognitive hypotheses regarding actual or virtual communicative intentions are generated, and it is after such generation that reflective viewers consider how the affective states they experienced enhance the conveyance of the hypothesized messages.

In the case of *Badlands*, viewers leave the theatre with, forefront in their minds, their sense of shock as they witnessed Kit's murders, their sense of both beauty and horror as they watched Holly's home engulfed in flames, and their feelings of listlessness and aimlessness as Kit and Holly drive across the Badlands. However, less introspectively salient but no less present in their minds, is the bundle of propositional attitudes with contents such as those summed up in the opening paragraph, which, if prompted, they could effortlessly share. It is such effortlessness and lack of introspective salience that leads Coplan to believe that an investigation of affective states, rather than propositional attitudes, should serve as a "prolegomenon" (2009, p. 65) to a fuller understanding of the film.

The situation may be analogous to our practice of linguistic metaphor as characterized by neo-Griceans such as Elisabeth Camp. Camp argues that utterances such as "Bill's a bulldozer" (2006, p. 284) require hearers to undergo a two-stage process of first

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<sup>1</sup> I invoke here Noël Carroll's "suppositional imagination," according to which viewers are caused to entertain "a certain...propositional content...without committing [themselves] to it by way of belief" (1997, p.184).



extracting conventional semantic meaning and then, upon recognizing a violation of conversational maxims such as truth-telling, of quickly replacing this with an intended metaphorical content along the lines of “Bill is a tough guy who doesn’t let obstacles stand in his way” (2006, p. 284). The powerful introspective salience of the intended metaphorical meaning obscures this two-stage process, thereby causing hearers mistakenly to assimilate what is meant to what is said. But, as Camp points out, if challenged to justify their interpretations of metaphorical utterances, ordinary language users readily furnish reconstructions along the lines of “well, she can’t really be claiming that Bill is a bulldozer, because that’d be absurd: he’s a man, not a piece of landscape machinery. But he does share with bulldozers a propensity to obliterate obstacles...” (2006, p. 289). The ready availability of such explanations suggests that they did in fact first extract conventional semantic meaning and, upon realizing the absurdity of this, quickly searched for qualities of bulldozers that might be applied to Bill’s personality. If so, in the same way that the powerful introspective salience of the intended metaphorical meaning draws introspective attention away from actual mental machinations in instances of linguistic metaphor, the powerful introspective salience of affective states engendered by viewing Malick’s films may draw attention away from the actual order of mental processes in the minds of their viewers.

This analogy highlights the *possibility* that Coplan makes the same sort of mistake as those who argue against the neo-Gricean understanding of linguistic metaphor. It does not furnish an argument to the conclusion that she is in fact mistaken in this way. But presentation of the required argument must await presentation of what I take the central

metaphor of the film to be, in §4.

That said, I point to Camp's understanding of linguistic metaphor, not merely to furnish an analogy, but as well to furnish an understanding of visual metaphor that will be applied in subsequent discussion. This understanding regards visual and linguistic metaphor as essentially the same phenomenon. To see how this might work, consider first that images—moving or still—are marked surfaces that typically cause propositional attitudes and other states to form in the minds of their viewers. In the case of *Badlands*, the patterns of light projected on the screen cause viewers to imagine, among many other things, that Kit is driving a Cadillac off-road across the Badlands. This is an odd thing to be caused to imagine. Audience members bring with them from their ordinary lives the expectation that cars travel along roads, an expectation that has been reinforced by what they have been caused to imagine by other films, even those, such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), that involve young couples on crime sprees driving stolen cars across the American heartland.<sup>2</sup> Such a clash between expected and actual imagined contents initiates the same search for intended metaphorical meanings as is initiated in instances of linguistic metaphor.

Granted, linguistic metaphor differs from visual metaphor insofar as the former requires the application of knowledge of conventional semantic meaning to extract what is

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<sup>2</sup> Carroll refers to this bundle of expectations as the “realistic heuristic” (2008, p. 252) and points out that every fictional film relies on viewers bringing with them such beliefs from the extra-fictional world in order for the fictional world to be comprehensible. When the propositions they are caused to imagine contradict such beliefs, reflective viewers must decide whether simply to accept them as part of the fictional world or to regard them as being intended to trigger a search for metaphorical meaning. Unearthing the bases for such decisions, while a fascinating undertaking, lies beyond the scope of this discussion.

said, whereas in instances of the latter no such step is required. But the crucial similarity is at the level of engendered propositional attitudes. Both viewers and hearers are caused to form propositional attitudes that are at odds with their expectations, and it is this oddity that triggers searches for metaphorical meanings. The linguistic route to the formation of these attitudes is simply less direct.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Games and Persons

A group of children playing in a forest pretend that tree stumps are bears. Doing so enriches their game insofar as it allows for unexpected discoveries. Cresting a hill and encountering a stump leads to flight, much to the thrill of all. Kendall Walton (1990, pp. 35-43) famously analyzes such games of make-believe in terms of fictional facts engendering imaginings in the same way that, in ordinary life, facts engender beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Such a unified treatment of visual and linguistic metaphor has the virtue of integrating well with Arthur Danto's acknowledgment, late in his career, of Kant's aesthetic ideas. On this view, "art is cognitive, since it presents us with ideas, and...the [artist] has the ability to find sensory arrays through which these ideas are conveyed to the mind of the viewer" (Danto 2013, p.123). *One* way of conveying ideas via a sensory array might be to use images to engender dissonant suppositional imaginings in the minds of viewers, thereby triggering searches for metaphorical meanings, along with attempts at adjudication between them on the basis of affective states engendered by the cinematography or soundtrack (see §4).

<sup>4</sup> I concur with Carroll in his rejection of Walton's analysis of *pictorial representation* in terms of props and make-believe (1995, p. 97), and instead accept the more direct understanding, invoked above, according to which pictures cause, absent make-believe, suppositional imaginings. But Walton is clearly right about the structure of games and the role of imaginings within them. Thus, there are two senses of imagination invoked

However, not discussed by Walton, in games *desires* function differently. For the most part, in games first-order desires are imported from real life and then fictional facts and the resultant imaginings are adjusted to accommodate their satisfaction. It might be, for example, that the children have been reading about bears and so desire to interact with them, desires that are frustrated by their living in a bear-free region. Faced with a conflict between the satisfaction of their desires and the facts, games permit the facts to yield, rather than the desires. *Mere* wantons—those considered by Frankfurt—allow their first-order desires to compete and then let the victors be effective. Children engaged in games of make-believe take this one step further. Not only do such *radical* wantons allow the victor in this competition to be effective but, should their environmental facts not permit the satisfaction of the victorious desires, they dispense with those facts, replacing them with obliging fictional facts, in the manner of the children pretending that tree stumps are bears. Such fictional facts in turn engender imaginings, imaginings that interact with the victorious desires to produce satisfying behaviour. The children have their desires satisfied and get the thrill of running from an unexpected “bear,” even though the nearest bear is hundreds of miles away.

However, while such pretense can yield satisfaction of desires, there is typically an unease associated with it, especially as radical wantons begin to undergo the process of maturation into mere wantons. More and more, maturing radical wantons come to realize the ersatz character of such satisfaction and no longer wish to experience it. This is a natural

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here. Subsequent arguments do not rely equivocation between these and so I will simply use ‘imagine’ throughout and rely on context for disambiguation.

and healthy aspect of growing up. In this way, the radically wanton state is a natural precursor to the merely wanton state which, in turn, is, ideally, a precursor to development into a person.

This synthesis of an augmented Waltonian analysis of make-believe and Frankfurt's analysis of personhood furnishes a basis for an interpretation of Malick's screenplay that places the opposing trajectories of Kit and Holly in relief. After Kit murders Holly's father and burns their home, he and Holly take up residence in a secluded area on the edge of a river.

Holly announces in voiceover:

We'd be starting a new life, [Kit] said, and we'd have to change our names.  
His would be James. Mine would be Priscilla.  
(*Badlands*, 0:30:28)

Kit is shown building their riverside hideout, an elaborate tree fort complete with bedroom decorated with paintings and furnishings taken from the Sargis household, and a crude bathroom sink rigged up out of sticks and mirror and a basin evidently scavenged from a dump. A morning scene is the picture of domesticity, with Holly in curlers and Kit shaving in the mirror. Later, Holly tries on makeup, much as a girl who has found her mother's make-up kit might. As Adrian Martin observes, "Kit and Holly play at being a married couple" (2007). The crude implements Kit constructs serve as props generating fictional facts that, in turn, lead Kit and Holly to imagine that they are living in a well-appointed home, and to behave accordingly. All of this is reenforced by the lyrics of the contemporary Micky and Sylvia hit playing on their battery-operated radio and to which they dance:

Love is strange  
Lot of people  
Take it for a game

*(Badlands, 0:33:34)*

Due to her father's protectiveness, Holly has experienced a sheltered life and is in many ways still a child, as indicated by the contents of her bedroom revealed in the opening dolly shot. Playing house is thus natural for her. But this has left her in an unstable situation. As an adolescent, she is ready to leave such childhood games behind. In one of the most striking scenes of the film, Holly views old photographs in her father's stereopticon and reports in her voiceover the phenomenology associated with being jolted out of childhood and the imaginary worlds it involves:

It hit me that I was just this little girl, born in Texas, whose father was a sign painter and who had only just so many years to live...And what's the man I'll marry going to look like? ... For days afterward I lived in dread. At times I wished I could fall asleep and be taken off to some magical land, but this never happened.

*(Badlands, 0:36:01)*

It is as though Kit is her brother and they have been "playing house" but are suddenly called inside for dinner. She is awakened from their imaginary world and confronted by the facts of her circumstances. Kit is not her husband, as she has been pretending, nor is she Priscilla. She is Holly and will soon have to get on with a life constrained by her humble origin and her mortality. Naturally, she is terrified and wishes to return to the "magical land" of imagination, but there is now no going back.

Thus Holly begins the process of maturation, developing from radical to mere wanton, setting the stage for further development into a person. But she remains at a remove from achieving personhood, as it is one thing to lead life on the basis of beliefs rather than imaginings, but quite another to form desires about which first-order desires

will be permitted to interact with those beliefs. There is evidence that she soon takes this further step. Consider Holly's voiceover once again, but later in the film, as she and Kit are driving through the Badlands, by which point she has fully departed from the playing-house game and is looking for an escape from Kit. She resolves to

never again tag around with a hell-bent type, no matter how in love with him I was.

(*Badlands*, 1:10:31)

To be in love is, at minimum, to have a first-order desire to be with another person, and yet Holly indicates her determination henceforth not to permit such a desire to be effective, regardless of its strength, a clear manifestation of a volition. Holly has developed from radical wanton to mere wanton and is now showing the first signs of becoming a person, a status marked metaphorically by her helicopter ascension a few scenes later.

Kit's trajectory is different. Soon after he and Holly meet, Kit develops the powerful first-order desire to take Holly from her father. Thanks to his gun, he is able to act on and to satisfy this desire. But, at least initially, he chooses not to do so. Instead, he makes effective a weaker first-order desire to take Holly from her father *with his permission*. It is the effectiveness of this weaker desire that leads Kit to approach Mr. Sargis (Warren Oates) as he is restoring a billboard at the side of a highway and, with whatever degree of respect Kit can muster, make his request. Sargis turns him down. In the scenes that immediately follow, Kit reverts to acting on his powerful first-order desire to take Holly from her father: he sneaks into the Sargis household, packs Holly's belongings into a suitcase and, when confronted by Sargis, murders him. Such merely wanton behaviour quickly devolves into the radically wanton behaviour that both he and Holly exhibit as they live by the river.

Unlike Holly, however, Kit remains in the imaginary world long after they flee from their riverside hideout. Fatigued from being on the run, Kit orchestrates the invasion of the home belonging to the wealthy Mr. Scarborough (John Carter). After several hours of rest, they depart in Scarborough's Cadillac, Kit still pretending that they are a married couple, this time playing a game in which they are embarking on a road trip, complete with suitcase and travel apparel as props. Later, after Holly leaves him, Kit is finally forced to abandon these fictional facts and the imaginings they generate, and to accept that his desire to live with Holly will not be satisfied. But rather than return to the merely wanton state in which he destroyed Holly's home, he remains in a radically wanton state and switches to the satisfaction of his desire for celebrity. Once arrested, Kit is shown basking in the attention of troops at the air-force base where he is being held, bantering with them cheerfully and tossing his lighter, comb and pen as souvenirs. In Kit's new game, his personal items and even the troops are props that generate fictional facts subtending his imagined James Dean-type fame, thus satisfying his desire for celebrity. But his satisfaction is of the ersatz sort experienced by the children running from tree stump "bears," and, unlike those children and Holly, he never awakens from his imaginary world.

#### **4. The Transportation Metaphor**

Kit drives his own modest car and, later in the film, the Cadillac he steals from Scarborough. While in the Badlands, he and Holly wait along a rail line until a train thunders by. No boats appear in the film, but the tree fort Kit builds along the river looks like a raft, complete with tarpaulin sail and, while idling their days there, Holly reads aloud from *Kon-Tiki*, the story of



a raft-journey across the Pacific that was popular during the time the film is set.<sup>5</sup> Once arrested, Kit is taken to prison in an airplane. In these ways, all modern modes of vehicular transportation are woven into the screenplay.

Trains travel on rails, cars on roads, boats on water and planes in the air. Such media facilitate efficient forward movement and, to varying degrees, furnish guidance. Rails offer maximal guidance, obviating the need for steering altogether. Roads likewise offer guidance but less so insofar as drivers must make choices at intersections. Rivers offer less guidance still, as the helmsperson must decide whether to travel up the left, right or center channels, and the very direction of the river is mutable as it erodes its banks. Air offers no guidance at all, confronting the pilot with unfettered movement in all three dimensions.

In early scenes Kit drives his car along roads but, after he murders Sargis, he and Holly relocate to their riverside “raft.” After their riverside hideout is discovered they flee again in Kit’s car, but this scene is shot from a low camera angle making it look as though their car is travelling across an open expanse rather than on the network of roads. Once Kit swaps his Mercury for Scarborough’s Cadillac, he and Holly drive off-road through the Badlands, their only guidance coming from telephone poles. While in the Badlands, Holly’s interest is captured by the train moving in the distance and she urges Kit to drive over to have a look. The train passes with speed and direction thanks to the guidance of its rails. In

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<sup>5</sup> I would hazard that an early draft of the screenplay had Kit and Holly hiding on a raft, as Huck and Jim did in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (the long and wide Missouri River wends about 30 miles from Fort Dupree, and so Kit and Holly could easily drive there during the early-morning hours after Holly’s

the silence that follows, Kit resorts to spinning a discarded bottle for direction, but even this proves unsuccessful and, desperate, he arbitrarily heads toward a distant mountain. During Kit's final journey in the airplane we are shown the view from the cockpit, layers of cloud emphasizing the unrestraining three-dimensional character of the sky.

Kit thus undergoes a regression from modes of transportation that receive guidance to those that do not, a regression that constitutes the basis for the central metaphor of the film. Unpacking this metaphor in terms of Frankfurt's conception of personhood is plausible: vehicles furnish propulsion for movement as first-order desires furnish propulsion for action, but vehicular movement without the guidance of roads, rivers or rails is aimless in the same way that action without the guidance of second-order desires is wanton. Kit's vehicular regression over the course of the film thus signals his devolution from person to wanton. His aimlessness in the Badlands is a metaphor for his wanton state, and for the aimlessness of a wanton existence generally. The contrast between the train moving swiftly with the guidance of rails—a person, in terms of the metaphor—and Kit's aimlessness due to lack of guidance from roads or even a spun bottle—a wanton—highlights the degree of Kit's devolution and thus makes the train scene the climax of the film in terms of its central transportation metaphor.

At the outset I promised an argument against Coplan's methodological counsel that, especially in our encounters with Malick's films, we begin by creating an inventory of ways in which formal devices are used to engender affective states and then, once this task is

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house is burned), but plot plausibility or production costs associated with filming on the water led Malick to compromise and instead direct the set designer to create a raft-like structure on the riverbank.

completed, we use consideration of such states as starting points for cognitive investigations into philosophical themes. That argument should now be apparent. It is implausible that an understanding of abstract mappings of first-order desires onto vehicles and second-order desires onto roads, rivers or rails, is a state of mind achievable as a result of experiencing a series of affective states. At the very least, such experiences vastly underdetermine such a cognitive state. Instead, it is more plausible that reflective viewers, caused to imagine bizarre events such as that Kit is driving a Cadillac off-road, that he and Holly are drawn to a distant rail line, that they watch awestruck as a train hurdles by, and that, afterward, they spin a discarded bottle in a feeble attempt to acquire similar direction, begin, cognitively, to search through their inventories of philosophical knowledge, on the one hand, and of qualities they typically associate with cars and trains, on the other, in the hope that they can replace their bafflement with a metaphorical meaning. It is in this highly cognitive way that viewers generate hypotheses about philosophical themes being conveyed, such as Kit's devolution from person to wanton.

This is not to say that affective states play no role in the communicative process, only that the initial introspective salience of such states, as in instances of linguistic metaphor, obscures actual cognitive machinations. In reality, reflective viewers, *after* having generated hypotheses about what philosophical themes might be in play, return to the introspectively more salient affective states with which they left the theatre and consider how they, along with the formal techniques used in their generation, can be used to adjudicate between competing themes, or to enhance their conveyance.

To see how such adjudication or enhancement operates, consider again linguistic

metaphor, but this time as it is used in poetry. On the neo-Gricean understanding assumed here, when interpreting a poem, readers first extract the literal meanings of the words being read but then, given their evident violation of expectations, undertake a cognitive search for alternative, metaphorical meanings. After settling on candidate interpretations, they search for means of adjudicating between them and, once an interpretation has been accepted as best, look for ways in which it is enhanced by formal features of the poem. The use of euphonic or cacophonous sounds is one such means, as each can be either appropriate or inappropriate given one or more of the candidate interpretations. If they are appropriate with respect to an interpretation, this constitutes grounds for its acceptance and, at the same time, can be understood as enhancing the conveyance of that theme or message. If inappropriate, that usage constitutes grounds for rejection of that interpretation.

Matters are likewise in instances of visual metaphor offered in film, but with techniques such as the use of euphony and cacophony replaced by visual techniques, along with auditory techniques on the soundtrack. In the case of *Badlands*, it is clear from the large plume of dust trailing the Cadillac that Kit is driving at high speed, but Malick depicts its transit via long shots, situating the car against the backdrop of the vast, barren landscape, thus reducing its apparent motion to that of an aimless, crawling ant. In contrast, the passing train is depicted via medium shots and a close-up, techniques that emphasize its speed and direction. On the soundtrack, Malick uses a quiet woodwind-and-guitar arrangement of James Taylor's 'Migration' to accompany the long shots of the Cadillac, but then abruptly switches to the loud, dissonant sound of the train horn and the clatter of its wheels to accompany the medium shots and close-up of the train passing by. Such formal

techniques do indeed, as Coplan would point out, engender affective states in viewers, specifically, a sense of listlessness and aimlessness when presented with the crawling Cadillac accompanied by gentle melody, but then, suddenly, a sense of terror when presented with the fast-moving train accompanied by its loud horns and wheels. Such states do not in themselves point in the direction of considerations of wantons or persons. But they do furnish reason to accept an interpretation in such terms insofar as a wanton who encounters a person does often feel that their own existence, governed by the capricious dictates of their *lassie-faire* economy of first-order desires, is aimless and listless in comparison with the direction and purpose exhibited by the person governed by their moderated first-order desires. And this contrast in ways of living can, in a suddenly reflective wanton, engender a feeling of existential terror. Such affective congruencies not only furnish confirmation that this cognitively determined hypothesis about actual or virtual communicative intentions is valid but, as in analogous instances in poetry, constitute enhancement of the conveyance of that metaphorical content as well.

Hannah Patterson observes that “again and again, writers use the word ‘poetic’ to describe Malick’s work, usually in admiration, sometimes in derision, often in bafflement” (2007, p. 2). On the characterization of visual metaphor offered here, a way is opened to a precise understanding of *one* way in which Malick’s films are poetic. Poetry typically invokes metaphor. Metaphor, on Camp’s understanding, involves patently false assertions. Such assertions engender bafflement and, thus, in those with little patience for non-literal uses of language, derision. But, for those willing to invest the cognitive energy required in a search for metaphorical meaning, the payoff leads, ultimately, to admiration. Matters are likewise

with Malick's films, although the metaphors there are visual rather than linguistic. As noted, these metaphors involve causing viewers to imagine propositional contents that contradict their expectations. Such contradictions lead to bafflement and, in those viewers with little patience for narratives that defy their expectations, derision. But, for those willing to invest the effort, and who bring with them a measure of philosophical knowledge that can serve as a basis for unpacking the metaphors, the ultimate result may be admiration.

### 5. The Dynamics of Personhood

Whereas Holly's ascension is a product of normal maturation, Kit's devolution is aberrant, and so raises the question of what caused it. An answer can be found in Sargis. It is tempting to understand Sargis's antagonistic attitude toward Kit as arising from the natural desire of a father to protect his daughter. When Kit approaches him at the billboard, Sargis responds:

Just what do you think would happen to her if she stuck around with you, Kit?  
Guy like you.  
(*Badlands*, 0:17:49)

We all know the answer.

But such a deflationary reading fails to do justice to Sargis's centrality. At the start of the film, Kit, in his mid-twenties, has matured out of the childhood state of a radical wanton and is a mere wanton, walking off his job simply because he has "thrown enough trash for today" (*Badlands*, 0:03:23). But, as noted above, after spending time with Holly, he makes the attempt to intervene in his economy of first-order desires, an attempt that is squelched by Sargis. Kit then reverts to the wanton state and, soon thereafter, into the radically wanton state from which he never emerges. The plot sequence of the billboard, murder and

playing-house scenes indicates cause-and-effect, thus rendering Sargis's refusal to acknowledge Kit's attempt to intervene in his economy of first-order desires as an explanans for Kit's devolution.

The transportation metaphor buttresses this causal-explanatory interpretation. After Sargis's refusal and his subsequent murder, Kit and Holly begin their flight in Kit's car. They are shown driving on a road, a scene that dissolves (one of the few instances of the editing technique in the film) into the first of the sequence of scenes in which they construct their "raft." The road fades into the river signaling that Kit has traded a transportation medium that affords much guidance for one that affords less and, in terms of the metaphor, conveys the loss of Kit's volition.

Another telling metaphor is woven into the screenplay in an elegantly symmetrical way. Soon after meeting Holly, Kit gets a new job in a stockyard, which he maintains. We are then presented with a sequence of positive scenes depicting their developing relationship, a sequence which culminates, approximately one-quarter way into the film, with Kit taking several of their "tokens and things" (*Badlands*, 0:15:02), placing them in a basket tied to a red balloon, and launching it into a blue sky. The camera lingers on its ascent before fading to black. In the subsequent scene, filmed under a grey sky, Sargis shoots Holly's dog as punishment for her having deceived him by "running around [with Kit] behind his back" (*Badlands*, 0:15:32). The dog is shown panting its final breaths as blood, the same hue as the ascendant balloon, oozes from the wound. Approximately one-quarter of the way from the end of the film, Kit takes several more tokens, including the stereopticon photographs that Holly views when she first awakens from the playing-house game, and buries them in the

Badlands. The visual rhyme between the balloon and the blood suggests an equation of the two, which in turn suggests that Sargis might just as well have shot Kit's balloon out the sky as he did Holly's dog. If the image of the rising balloon can be taken as a metaphor for Kit's ascendant personhood, then the Badlands scene can be taken as a metaphor for its burial. Here, too, metaphor suggests that Sargis's behaviour is a causal factor in initiating Kit's devolution.

The alloyed affective states experienced by viewers confirm this causal-explanatory interpretation. Emotionally, viewers cheer Sargis on as he works to protect his daughter from Kit and yet, suddenly, they experience indignation as Sargis coldly shoots Holly's dog. These alloyed emotions adjudicate in favour of an interpretation of Sargis as representing, not simply a protective father, but rather a more complex negative force, one that triggers Kit's devolution. Indeed, such alloyed emotions might adjudicate in favour of an even stronger interpretation of Sargis's relation to Kit, one according to which Sargis initiates Kit's devolution via *contagion*. On this interpretation, Sargis himself is a wanton insofar as he permits his powerful first-order desire to protect his daughter control his behaviour, and he transmits this wanton status to Kit, a transmission indicated by Kit's coming to wear the same style of Panama hat near the end of the film as Sargis wears until the moment of his death. The congruence between our affective ambivalence toward Kit by the end of the film—he is at once charming in his banter with the troops at the air-force base and horrifying in his capacity for cold-blooded murder—and our affective ambivalence toward Sargis confirms, and even enhances, this contagion interpretation.

Malick's later films involve character pairs locked in the same dynamic. In *The Thin*



*Red Line* (1998), a depiction of the Guadalcanal campaign during the Second World War, Lt. Col. Tall (Nick Nolte) orders a frontal assault on the enemy bunkered at the top of a mountain, regardless of the cost in terms of the lives of his troops. Capt. Staros (Elias Koteas), protective of his men, instead insists on a less costly flanking maneuver, and directly disobeys Tall's order. Tall prevails, and the troops successfully capture the mountain via the frontal assault. Staros is relieved of his command.<sup>6</sup>

Both Tall and Staros have powerful, first-order desires to rout the enemy and to protect their troops. But the former desires must be stronger than the latter, as the lives of a handful of men are insignificant in comparison with the larger campaign on which the lives of thousands turn. Tall permits the economy of first-order desires to play out in his psyche with the result that his desire to rout the enemy wins, thus motivating his command for a frontal assault. Staros, in contrast, intervenes in that economy and instead makes his weaker desire to protect his men effective, thus motivating his refusal to obey Tall's

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<sup>6</sup> There is disagreement regarding the plot. Critchley 2009, p.18, interprets Staros' disobedience as leading Tall to adopt Staros' requested flanking maneuver. In contrast, Pippin 2015, n. 28, and Silverman 2003, p. 329, interpret Staros' requested flanking maneuver as being flatly and consistently rejected by Tall, and Tall's frontal assault proceeding unaltered and successfully, albeit on the next day. To my mind, Pippin and Silverman are correct. It is clear from Tall's description (*The Thin Red Line*, 0:38:17) that a flanking maneuver would require a battle in the jungle. This is confirmed by Staros' request (1:06:54) for a maneuver through the jungle. But at no time during the assault are soldiers shown in the jungle. The jungle does appear behind Tall and Staros during the pause in the attack (around 1:21:05), but numerous soldiers are shown with their guns poised to fire into the jungle, should the enemy emerge. They have established a perimeter defending their troops from the enemy-controlled territory in the jungle, a region that Tall refuses to enter.

command. Tall overrides Staros and thereby undermines Staros's attempt to manifest personhood. In this respect Tall in relation to Staros is akin to Sargis in relation to Kit.

An economy of first-order desires is something that human organisms share with many other living things, but the capacity to overrule the dictates of that economy is something which, so far as we know, is uniquely human. Perhaps it is a recent evolutionary development. If so, it has led to an unstable cognitive architecture insofar as it yields two warring factions, with second-order volitions battling dominant first-order desires for control of behaviour. If unguided transportation is the basis for the central metaphor in *Badlands*, then the battle at Guadalcanal is the basis for the central metaphor in *The Thin Red Line*, the historical warring factions representing the warring elements of the human psyche.

Like the battle at Guadalcanal, the battle within the psyche is not conducted on equal terms. The bunkered economy of first-order desires has the high-ground advantage of evolutionary precedence relative to the nascent capacity for second-order intervention in that economy. When, within an individual, the latter triumphs, the victory is remarkable. Therein lies the source of at least some of the value associated with the manifestation of personhood. This value must also be assigned to interpersonal behaviour that fosters such manifestation and, conversely, any interpersonal behaviour that inhibits it must be assigned negative value. Sargis and Tall are thus both negative elements within the respective films, and Kit and Staros are victims.

In a conventional Hollywood war film viewers expect to experience triumph when, formidable obstacles notwithstanding, the troops on "their" side finally rout the enemy. But

that is not what viewers experience when Tall's frontal assault succeeds or, at least, that is not their unalloyed experience. Instead, sympathy for Staros remains powerful, as do negative feelings toward Tall. If there are two competing interpretations vying for acceptance here, one a simple message about the importance of being ruthless in war and the other a complex, metaphorically conveyed message about competing factions within the human psyche, such contradictory affective states adjudicate against the simple interpretation and in support of the more complex one. As was the case with their alloyed emotions in relation to Sargis, their alloyed emotions here indicate to viewers that a metaphorical interpretation, rather than a straightforward interpretation along the lines of a standard Hollywood script, is an appropriate one.

The capacity to intervene in the economy of first-order desires is further disadvantaged by the fact that wanton behaviour frequently fosters practical gain, whereas attempts to moderate such behaviour frequently come at practical cost. This the case both with Sargis in relation to Kit, and Tall in relation to Staros. Sargis is correct that shielding Holly from Kit is in her best interest, and Tall is correct that a frontal assault will be effective in routing the enemy.

Malick's most recent film deals especially with these practical costs frequently associated with the manifestation of personhood. *A Hidden Life* (2019) is also set during the Second World War, but in Europe rather than the South Pacific. As the war begins, the married co-protagonists Franz and Franziska Jägerstätter (August Diehl and Valerie Pachner) are leading an idyllic life, raising their children on a prosperous farm amidst a tight-knit community set against the backdrop of the beautiful Austrian Alps. With the Anschluss,

however, Franz is conscripted and required to declare loyalty to Hitler and join the German army. He refuses and, as a result, is imprisoned, tortured and executed. Franziska and their children, left behind, are ostracized and impoverished.

Both Franz and Franziska have strong first-order desires to protect their family and maintain their idyllic life. Franz also has a weaker desire to do what is morally right by refusing to take part in Hitler's war. Franziska, also has a weaker desire in that, motivated by unconditional love, she wants to support Franz in whatever decision he makes. She declares such support and, thus, unlike Sargis and Tall, does not undermine Franz's attempt to make his weaker desire to do what is morally right effective. He is thus left to persist in his refusal. In these ways both Franz and Franziska manifest personhood, but the cost in practical terms is enormous.

## 6. Personhood and Suicide

There is no conceptual connection between possessing an economy of first-order desires, on the one hand, and the capacity for volition, on the other. The question thus arises why humans have that capacity, especially given the inner conflict such possession entails. Perhaps having the capacity bestows survival advantage by enabling humans to organize in mutually advantageous ways. Whatever the reason, individual humans are left with the problem of managing the conflict while embedded in social environments populated with those who, like Sargis and Tall, inhibit its exercise.

The ensemble cast of *The Thin Red Line* includes Pvt. Witt (Jim Caviezel), who begins the film AWOL, is captured by military police and imprisoned, but is then permitted to

return to duty, whereupon he volunteers to join the small group of soldiers who lead the successful frontal assault on the enemy bunkered on the mountain. Near the end of the film, in a battle that takes place further inland and against a reenforced enemy, Witt again acts heroically by luring the enemy away in order to protect his comrades. However, this manoeuvre results in his being surrounded and, although given the opportunity to surrender by dropping his weapon, he instead, after a moment of thought, raises his weapon and so is shot dead.<sup>7</sup>

This final action amounts to suicide, and thus raises the question of why someone who has acted so heroically would choose to end his life. Witt, like his comrades, has desires both for self-preservation and to defeat the bunkered enemy. Assuming that the former desire is more powerful than the latter and, given the carnage that has resulted from earlier attempts to capture the mountain, a wanton would refuse to volunteer. But Witt is one of the few in the company who does volunteer and, in this way, he manifests personhood. Matters are likewise in his later action, although in this instance Witt's desire for self-preservation is up against his desire to protect his comrades. Here, too, it is natural to assume that the former desire is more powerful than the latter and, given the extreme risk involved in luring a large contingent of enemy soldiers, a wanton would refrain from doing so. And, yet, Witt performs the action, running noisily through the jungle and shouting calls

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<sup>7</sup> Simon Critchley speculates that the enemy soldier is "demanding that [Witt] defend himself" (2009, p. 23). In fact, the soldier is saying that he does not want to kill Witt and that, as he is surrounded, Witt had better surrender. Given the lack of common language it is conceivable that Witt misunderstands him, but this would

when he feels the enemy has lost his trail. He thus, once again, manifests personhood.

One interpretation of Witt's final action is that his desire for self-preservation is in competition with his desire not to be taken prisoner and the latter desire is the more powerful of the two. The suicidal raising of his weapon is simply the product of an economy of first-order desires being permitted to run its course. A richer interpretation, however, finds its source in the voiceovers that constitute the opening dialogue of the film. The first words we hear are from Pvt. Train (John Dee Smith) reflecting on the conflict around him:

What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself?  
(*The Thin Red Line*, 0:01:47)

Next, we hear Witt as he remembers his mother on her deathbed:

I asked her if she was afraid. She just shook her head.  
(*The Thin Red Line*, 0:04:20)

Witt then reflects on his own death in relation to hers:

I wondered how it'd be when I died, what it'd be like to know that this breath now was the last one you was ever gonna draw. I just hope I can meet it the same way she did, with the same...calm.  
(*The Thin Red Line*, 0:05:53)

The placement of this dialogue at the start of the film and Witt's decision to raise his gun at the end suggests that we interpret that final action in terms of that dialogue. If the war is indeed a metaphor for the conflict within the human psyche then that dialogue is announcing the questions that inform the screenplay: why is there a conflict within our

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raise the question of why Malick did not simply write the demand that Witt defend himself into the screenplay.

psyches and how will we each successfully manage it? The calm Witt's mother experienced as she was dying is the product of such successful management, and Witt himself desires such success. In twice profoundly manifesting personhood Witt has discovered the key to experiencing such calm and, surrounded by the enemy, finds himself in a position to end his life while experiencing it. His suicide is thus a positive action, one that takes place after he has resolved the inner conflict in favor of the manifestation of personhood.

Near the end of *Badlands*, Kit has an opportunity to escape the pursuing police but instead stops, shoots out his front tyre, and then uses the moments before the police catch up with him to pile rocks in a way that looks like a grave maker, all the while aware that, if apprehended, he will likely "take the juice" (*Badlands*, 1:23:34). Kit's action, like Witt's raising of his gun, is thus a form of suicide. But Kit's exit takes place under very different circumstances from Witt's. Kit was blocked by Sargis in his attempt to manifest personhood, thus triggering his descent from borderline person to wanton to radical wanton. The conflict within his psyche has not been resolved in a way that liberates his potential to manifest personhood and so he cannot experience the calm that is a product of such resolution. His suicide is thus a negative action, one motivated by despair.

One of Malick's brothers took his own life in the late 1960s, an event which would no doubt have had an impact on Malick's thinking generally, and on his screenplays in particular (Biskind, 1998, pp. 248-249). The suicides woven into *Badlands* and *The Thin Red Line* may be interpreted as attempts on his part to understand this loss. Was his brother motivated in the manner of Witt or in the manner of Kit and, if the latter, what was the cause of his despair and how might we interact with one another in ways that forestall it?

Perhaps the interpretations offered here furnish insight into Malick's motivations in this way. Regardless, as noted at the outset, they find value insofar as they discharge the onus built into the reflexive condition that is at the centre of Fodor's analysis of artworks. The screenplays considered have sufficient structure to lay the basis for such metaphorical interpretations and, in this way, constitute an invitation by a (real or virtual) artist for their audience to engage their cognitive facilities. The offered transportation and battle metaphors constitute an acceptance of this invitation and insure that, if their audience is indeed being enjoined to think about what it is to be a person and what circumstances foster or impede the development of a person, this is being done with their full recognition. The interaction between artist and audience, unlike that between advertisers and consumers, is thus consummately ethical in broadly Kantian terms.

Near the outset I illustrated Frankfurt's concept of a person in terms of the progression undergone by Proust's narrator over the large arc of *In Search of Lost Time*, and noted the substantial divergence between this conception and those that are invoked in more prosaic contexts such as bioethics. This raises the worry that Frankfurt's conception is merely technical, a product of definitional stipulation, and that, for this reason, it lacks the value associated with conceptions lying closer to ordinary human practices, conceptions that can foster understanding of those practices. And—worse—beyond defining personhood in terms of the capacity to form second-order desires (and make them effective), he states that “there is no essential restriction on the kind of basis, if any, upon which [those desires] are formed” (Frankfurt 1971, p. 13). While I concur at least insofar as characterizations of such deliberation should be left open-ended, perhaps, by looking at the



examples set by Proust's narrator and Malick himself, we can conclude at least that a resolution to pursue the creative life constitutes *one* sort of manifestation of such deliberation. If so, Frankfurt's conception finds value at least insofar as it helps us to understand such resolutions and factors that interfere with them. On this understanding, Kit, Staros and the Jägerstätters function as metaphors for those who resolve to pursue the creative life, and Sargis and Tall as metaphors for those who forestall doing so.

Kit is no longer a person near the end of *Badlands* and so the metaphor of a scarecrow, noted at the outset, is appropriate. But, in light of the discussion here, Kit's figure, with the rifle over his shoulders and his arms slung limply across, becomes ambiguous. If his descent is indeed a result of immersion in an environment populated with those who, like Sargis and Tall, inhibit the manifestation of personhood, he is a *victim* of that environment. His death might even be regarded as a martyrdom insofar as it occasions reflection on factors that inhibit the manifestation of personhood generally, in the hope that the understanding generated by such reflection will help to ameliorate such factors in the future. If so, Kit's figure is not only that of a scarecrow, but a Christ figure as well.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> My thanks to two anonymous referees whose criticism and advice led to substantial corrections, additions and improvements. This paper celebrates the life of Charles Edward Walden, my father, who calmly underwent medically assisted death during the time it was being written.

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