



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Badlands

Badlands

Director: Terrence Malick
©/Production Company:
Pressman-Williams Enterprises
A Production by: Jill Jakes
Executive Producer: Edward R. Pressman
Producer: Terrence Malick
Associate Producer: Lou Stroller
Production Manager: William Scott
Locations: Cinemobile
Assistant Directors: John Broderick, Carl Olsen
Screenplay: Terrence Malick
Directors of Photography: Brian Probyn,
Tak Fujimoto, Stevan Lerner
Special Effects: Sam Shaw
Editor: Robert Estrin
Associate Editor: William Weber
Art Director: Jack Fisk
Associate Art Director: Edward Richardson
Set Dresser: Ken Hilton
Costumes: Rosanna Norton
Make-up/Hair: Dona Baldwin
Titles/Processing: Consolidated Film Industries
Music Composed/Conducted by: George Tipton
Music Editor: Erma Levin
Recording by: Glen Glenn
Production Mixer: Maury Harris
Sound Editor: James Nelson
Stunt Arranger: George Fisher
Cast:
Martin Sheen (*Kit Carruthers*)
Sissy Spacek (*Holly*)
Warren Oates (*father*)
Ramon Bieri (*Cato*)
Alan Vint (*deputy*)
Gary Littlejohn (*Sheriff*)
John Carter (*rich man*)
Bryan Montgomery (*boy*)
Gail Threlkeld (*girl*)
Charles Fitzpatrick (*clerk*)
Howard Ragsdale (*boss*)
John Womack Jr. (*trooper on plane*)
Dona Baldwin (*maid*)
Ben Bravo (*gas station attendant*)
USA 1973©
94 mins
Digital

With intro by Ruby McGuigan, BFI Programme and
Acquisitions (Wed 26 Jun only)

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There have always been movies where the sign 'badlands' was a significant warning – *Badlands of Dakota* (1941), *Badlands of Montana* (1957) and just plain *Bad Lands* (1939). These are minor films, ones we may not need to remember, but in each the term stands for a place you just don't want to be. Historically 'badlands' meant a part of South Dakota and Nebraska, a place where nothing ever grew or flourished. And 'badlands' is also used to signify a terrain of buttes and mesas, beyond farming or habitation. We don't see that land in Terrence Malick's film, a picture in which the flat desolation of the ground is part of a tale of casual slaughter's beautifully composed lack of affect. But Malick's landscape isn't an area of barren hopelessness either. The place where Kit and Holly head – out of South Dakota and into Montana – is a strange playground where Carl Orff and Erik Satie's music accompanies the reckless dreams of uneducated kids. They have such unsmiling fun.

In 1973-74, as *Badlands* opened it was easy to see the film's set-up as another version of two wild and frustrated kids going on the lam, 'breaking out' and breaking into the mythic space of the American frontier: the film was heavy with nudges about Kit Carruthers (Martin Sheen) looking like James Dean. And in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Jonathan Rosenbaum's alert eye saw the first shot of Kit working the garbage truck in Fort Dupree, South Dakota, as a reference to *Rebel without a Cause* (1955). But any plans for a film about an alienated kid who wants to escape the traps set by life are quickly dashed.

Nicholas Ray would have soaked us in Kit's backstory – a tortured home life (so no going home), wretched schooling, premature delinquency, a rough life on the road and a deep if inarticulate denial of the values of Eisenhower's America. Malick's Kit does not buy that package. There is no backstory, beyond our feeling that 'Kit Carruthers' is a fancy and suspicious name for so chronic a faker (the model in history was named Charles Starkweather). Kit is a life force and a trickster, beyond pity or social diagnosis. He is vicious, comic, image-fixated – close to crazy. And Sheen plays him with a thoroughly cool detachment that simply underlines how much Dean always ached for pity. Kit is a psychopath given to all manner of conversational curlicues. He can hardly say anything, or hear anything said without adding some trite *Reader's Digest* footnote. 'What you doing?' he asks a man he has kidnapped. 'Just thinking,' says the scared guy. Kit chips in with his usual smartass flourish and some fancy nihilism – 'As good a way to kill time as any.' He is somewhere between Sam Goldwyn and Wittgenstein. ('Aren't we all?' I hear him reply.)

Nick Ray never made a film in which a hero wants to kill time – yet Malick seems to view killing time and offing other people as part of the same behavioural spectrum. Early on we meet and say farewell to Holly's father, played by Warren Oates. He is Ray-like, I suppose, in that he blindly opposes her friendship with Kit, and brutal – he kills her dog when she keeps seeing the garbage boy. But Malick sees so much more. There in Fort Dupree, South Dakota (a dot, if you can find it), the father is a sign painter ready for the Tate Modern. There is a moment when Kit comes to see him. He gets out of his car and the camera follows his movement to reveal a composition of utter and immodest grandeur – a huge primitive picture that the father is painting with the sky itself (just as naive and vivid) behind it. The father may kill Holly's pets but

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Apocalypse Now: The Final Cut

Sat 1 Jun 15:00; Sat 8 Jun 19:40; Sat 15 Jun 19:40;
Sun 23 Jun 19:20

The Wages of Fear Le Salaire de la peur

Sat 1 Jun 17:40; Tue 11 Jun 20:15; Wed 19 Jun
14:20; Sun 30 Jun 14:40

The General + Cops

Sat 1 Jun 18:40; Wed 12 Jun 12:10

Cléo from 5 to 7 Cléo de 5 à 7

Sat 1 Jun 20:50; Wed 5 Jun 18:10 (+ intro
programmer Jelena Milosavljevic); Fri 14 Jun 20:50;
Fri 21 Jun 12:10

It Happened One Night

Sun 2 Jun 13:00; Mon 17 Jun 12:10; Tue 25 Jun
20:30

Badlands

Sun 2 Jun 20:45; Mon 10 Jun 12:20; Wed 26 Jun
18:15 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, BFI Programme
and Acquisitions)

Sullivan's Travels

Mon 3 Jun 18:10; Mon 10 Jun 20:50; Fri 14 Jun
14:45; Mon 24 Jun 12:10

North by Northwest

Mon 3 Jun 20:20; Thu 6 Jun 14:30; Tue 18 Jun
14:30

Easy Rider

Tue 4 Jun 12:40; Fri 7 Jun 21:00; Sun 16 Jun 20:35;
Sat 22 Jun 13:20

The Searchers

Tue 4 Jun 20:30; Thu 20 Jun 12:10; Sat 29 Jun
15:20

Where Is the Friend's House? Khaneh-je Doost Kojast

Wed 5 Jun 12:45; Sat 8 Jun 15:40; Wed 19 Jun
18:15 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-
Large); Wed 26 Jun 21:00

Alice in the Cities Alice in den Städten

Sun 9 Jun 20:20; Thu 13 Jun 12:00; Fri 28 Jun
12:20

Gun Crazy

Wed 12 Jun 18:20 (+ intro by Josephine Botting,
BFI National Archive Curator); Mon 24 Jun 20:30;
Thu 27 Jun 12:20

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he is some kind of a genius. But very soon Kit pops him – bullets in the chest – and then leaves the body to burn in the torched house. (As Kit pours gasoline on the open piano, Malick hears a sliver of melody.) Holly watches this and goes with the killer as if she's following a movie and feels too bored to resist (boredom is always close to these kids' fun, and Malick stirs it as if fascinated by a sleeping snake). It's not just that the parental bond counted for too little; it's more that fondness doesn't register in this picture. And that's what the music supplies: it fills in the empty spaces around this murderous ritual and makes it resemble a languid dance for insects.

Throughout *Badlands* we keep asking the question: why Kit and Holly? What depth or need in human nature are they illustrating? Or is their collision chance? It's not sex, no matter that in the film Kit is 25 and Holly 15 (Sheen was 32 and Spacek 22). As so often, these high-school dropouts are horribly mature. But they try sex (off camera) and we come in on a buttoning-up moment with talk about it being a lot of talk. They carry on regardless because it may be unflawed childish fusion that they seek. That takes many forms – dancing in the dust to 'Love Is Strange' by Mickey and Sylvia, living in their tree house and engaging in deadpan dialogues where Spacek's voice is the lovely druggy counter to Sheen's muttered boastings. Given the real age of the actors and the recessive youth of the characters, this must have been very hard to play. Spacek is the child who can see her father murdered without dismay, the stunned face that observes the drab wilderness and the shy, tired girl who at last opts out of Kit's careering advance (so much subtler an abdication than Bonnie's wish not to see the end of it all in *Bonnie and Clyde*). As for Sheen, here we can see the great actor who slipped away into such steady, worthy things as *The West Wing*. Kit is maybe the gentlest, chattiest psycho in American film, a talksmith who performs the verbal equivalent of card tricks to defy the banality of small talk. After he has shot his fellow garbage-worker Cato for no apparent reason, Holly asks, 'Is he upset?' (Cato is dying.) 'He didn't say anything to me about it,' replies Kit.

Such talk is not just a tic, a silly answering back. It's a kind of grim screwball comedy – or a realisation that this America has gone past the point where it can take serial killing simply for what it is. The gap between murder and laughter is now itself a joke, and the cowboy sheriffs who eventually nail Kit are parodies of old-time posses, feeding on Kit's celebrity, his greasy comb and the way he looks like that Dean guy. I had not realised until my most recent viewing how far *Badlands* is poised on the edge of being a comedy – and I suspect that at the time it was made that verdict was far from the minds of the makers. But that is how art can push up concrete if it is a strong enough green shoot. The music by Orff and Satie is not pretentious, but comically ambitious. Sheen's deft sparring with words lampoons a society where everyone else speaks with monumental simplicity – though Holly is clearly a wishful creative writer who speaks in sentences probably written in purple crayon in her exercise book.

David Thomson, *Sight and Sound*, September 2008