

From Wander to Wonder

Walking – and “Walking-With” – in Terrence Malick’s Contemplative Cinema

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Abstract

This essay considers the prominent role of acts and gestures of walking – a persistent, though critically neglected motif – in Terrence Malick’s cinema. In recognition of many intimate connections between walking and contemplation, I argue that Malick’s particular staging of walking characters, always in harmony with the camera’s own “walks”, comprises a key source for the “contemplative” effects that especially philosophical commentators like to attribute to his style. Achieving such effects, however, requires that viewers be sufficiently engaged by the walking presented on-screen. Accordingly, Malick’s films do not fixate on single, extended episodes of walking, as one would find in Slow Cinema. They instead strive to enact an experience of walking that induces in viewers a particular sense of “walking-with”. In this regard, I examine Malick’s continual reliance on two strategies: (a) Steadicam following-shots of wandering figures, which involve viewers in their *motion* of walking; and (b) a strict avoidance of long takes in favor of cadenced montage, which invites viewers into a reflective *rhythm* of walking.

Keywords: walking, cinema, Terrence Malick, contemplation, film style

Preamble

Since I wish to propose here the significance of walking to the cinema of Terrence Malick, this essay itself demands to be something of an ambulatory excursion. Though some wandering will prove to be inevitable, my reflections here will nevertheless make their way through three clear stations. The first, *film-critical* stopover is to call attention to the pure abundance of walking throughout Malick's films, which – curiously – remains virtually unremarked upon by critics and scholars. The second station is a *film-philosophical* one. It is to point out the intimate connections that generally exist between walking and contemplation, with a view to foreground walking as a key ingredient of the widely acknowledged contemplative appeal of Malick's filmmaking. The third and final station of the essay is perhaps best viewed as *phenomenological*: in order to substantiate the contemplative appeal that I claim walking brings to Malick's cinema, I describe how his films afford viewers a distinct experience of "walking-with". If it is so, as many commentators attest, that Malick makes his viewers "wonder", I propose that he notably achieves this by enabling them to "wander".

Malick's Cinema of Walking

Walking, wandering characters are an enduring, near-incessant feature of Malick's cinema. A feature so utterly evident, in truth, makes me hesitant to present it as a "new finding". Anyone familiar with Malick's films – think of the sauntering characters in the wheat fields of *Days of Heaven* (1978); the roaming figures of Pocahontas and John Smith in *The New World* (2005); or the many pondering strolls that permeate *To the Wonder* (2012) – will immediately recognize both the prominence and persistence of walking in his films.¹ Yet evident as this motif may be (and though the topic of walking has attracted considerable scholarly attention recently² – also in film studies³), I know of not a single commentary explicitly dedicated to walking in Malick's oeuvre.⁴

Since Malick's return from his so-called "twenty year hiatus" with *The Thin Red Line* (1998), he has been bent on progressively distilling his style to its most rudimentary elements (Kohn 2015).

This progressive push for stylistic abstraction has increasingly accentuated – among other things – his elliptical, impressionistic style of narration, based on discontinuous editing. Owing to his affinity for narrative ellipses, Malick’s films typically explore the “in-between” moments, before and after dramatic events occur.⁵ And it is in the progressive growth of *these* moments that Malick’s cinema has grown into a cinema of walking. For, as a general rule, Malick’s in-between moments involve characters taking a walk. They stroll. They wander. They pensively move in circles. More often than not, in fact, Malick’s protagonists walk as an extension of finding themselves in some condition of *journey* – whether the journey be that of migrant workers, of colonizers and their colonized, or of an immigrant in love. They usually end up as strangers in unknown settings, in which they must in more than one sense “find their way”

Yet his ceaseless depiction of walking characters make up only one side of Malick’s cinema of walking. For depicted acts of walking are nearly always presented within a mobile frame – a visual gesture of the camera taking its own “walks”. This is an even more pervasive feature of Malick’s style: a typically wandering camera movement that suggests the phantom perspective of an “additional character”, drifting through both scenes and sceneries (see Neer 2011). Such flowing cinematography is often tethered to a character, as a “partner in walking” that oscillates between showing us the character’s body and showing us what the character sees. When there is more than one character, the mobile frame waves and weaves between people, momentarily latching onto one, only to then leave that person for another. And Malick’s moving camera also “drifts off” on its own – sometimes it literally pans or tilts away from characters; or it simply appears as an undefined, unfocalized point of view that floats alone across a character-less setting. The career-long development of Malick’s style is very much one in which his images are increasingly prone to wander.

Malick’s interest in the “wandering camera”, it turns out, is quite a literal one. Nestor Almendros, Malick’s cinematographer for *Days of Heaven*, produced the film’s pioneering flowing aesthetic by using, for the first time, the so-called “Panaglide”, a forerunner to the Steadicam. This elaborate brace attached to Almendros’ body enabled him to inscribe his own free movements into the film’s sweeping imagery (see Morrison and Schur 2003, 122–23;

Cousins 2011, 351). Since then, Malick has had a growing affinity for gliding Steadicam and handheld camerawork (finding its apotheosis in his collaborations with cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki). Consequently, Malick's work is more and more infused with perpetual motion – most of which is effected through actual “walks” with the camera.

In terms of a concrete example, consider C Company's inland march towards their Japanese enemy in *The Thin Red Line*. The sequence exemplifies Malick's particular cinema of walking in a number of ways. Most notably, it exudes the fluid shots that characteristically flow forth from his depictions of walking: ever-moving characters are presented with roving cinematography that seems to never come to a halt. This sense is reinforced by a complementary flow in editing, which rhythmically runs through a variety of sights with both striking cutaways and jump-cuts. In the words of the film's cinematographer, John Toll, Malick insisted on the pictures having “the same kind of flow” as “moving down a river” (Toll quoted in Pizzello 1999).

What is least typical of Malick in the C Company sequence, however, is the *kind* of walking that it presents. As Malick's only “war movie”, *The Thin Red Line* is the only film in which his characters move in the restricted, regimented manner that we see here. Moreover, this is by far the most apprehensive state in which Malick's walking characters are ever depicted. Malick normally avoids any indications of laboriousness in walking (even the soldiers in *The Thin Red Line* are much rather anxious or overwhelmed than they are tired). Hence, characters – and viewers for that matter – are never subjected to the taxing experiences of walking that we for instance find in so-called Slow Cinema, if we think of Béla Tarr's effortful walks against the wind in *Satan's Tango* (1994) and *The Turin Horse* (2011), or the incessant trudging that Gus van Sant exploits in *Gerry* (2002). A typical stroll in Malick instead exudes a definite tranquility – if not of mind, at least of posture. There is a freedom and spontaneity – perhaps an indecisiveness – to characters' movements. This applies as much to Midwestern suburbs as it does to the wilderness of the New World. When and where characters walk, they do not to head anywhere in particular – they simply walk *around*, as if not knowing for what exactly they are searching for. Sometimes these wanderings spill over into circular move-

ments, running, playing games. Malick's walks extend from a variety of apparent states: pensiveness, playfulness, sometimes wonderment and bliss. However, it is clear what they are not: they are never acts of exertion.

Walking and Contemplation

This profusion of walking in Malick films holds a very specific interest to me as a film philosopher: it points to a potential source of the *contemplative effects* that commentators often attribute to the filmmaker's style. On a previous occasion, I explored in considerable detail the pre-occupation of especially philosophical commentators with what may be called Malick's "contemplative style" (see Rossouw 2017).⁶ There, among other things, I noted the range of stylistic techniques to which philosopher-critics attribute Malick's distinctive contemplative (thoughtful, ruminative, meditative) appeal: the techniques most frequently cited as key to Malick's contemplative style are his luminous presentations of nature, his use of voice-over monologues, juxtapositions of image and sound, discontinuous editing, superfluous repetitions, epiphanic music, and episodic, elliptical narratives (ibid., 282–85).

Since on that occasion I restricted myself only to meta-critical commentary, I here would like to add to the above inventory of techniques the crucial role that acts and cinematic gestures of walking play within Malick's contemplative style. Walking itself, of course, enjoys widespread recognition as a potent contemplative activity. Therefore, in cinematic acts and gestures of walking, unlike the rest of Malick's stylistic hallmarks,⁷ we have a stylistic motif that coincides with what is actually a commonly practiced contemplative technique. For this reason, I propose, the prominent motif of walking constitutes a distinct source of the contemplative experience and effects that Malick's cinema is said to hold for viewers. Film philosophers like to suggest that Malick's contemplative style positions viewers in a reciprocating mode of contemplation (ibid.). Yet this is never truer than when Malick takes his viewers for a cinematic walk. Through his cinematic renderings of walking – walking characters, in harmony with the "walks" of the camera – Malick establishes for viewers a distinct means to a heightened state of reflection.

This proposal rests on a number of intimate connections that can be drawn between walking and contemplation. Firstly, there is the

commonly held intuition that walking *stimulates* thinking. Most people will acknowledge, based on personal experience, this kinship between walking and mental activity – whether walking serves as a way of getting ideas, gaining perspective, or simply “clearing the mind”. Yet what was always an intuition is now beginning to receive some scientific scrutiny and, indeed, validation.⁸

Secondly, there is a long tradition of thinkers, writers, and artists who rely on walking for meeting the reflective demands of their professions. The testimonies of such celebrated figures further entrench the contemplative benefits of walking also as a deep-seated cultural topos. Frédéric Gros’ eloquent treatise, *A Philosophy of Walking* (2014a), for example, details this tradition of contemplative walking within philosophy. Gros walks us through a by-now canonical group of “walking philosophers” – including Rousseau, Kant, Nietzsche and Thoreau – all of whom, apart from addressing walking in their philosophies, insisted that taking actual walks were essential to their personal reflective pursuits.

Thirdly, and perhaps most tellingly, it seems that we cannot but experience contemplative activities *in terms of* walking. Here the connection is not just that walking stimulates thinking, but that acts of thinking – how we conceive of and experience them – invariably takes on the image of walking. Whether the contemplative activity in question is meditation, reading, writing, viewing a painting, or making art, it will inevitably lend itself to the experience of “mind-walking”, as Tim Ingold (2010) describes it. In terms of writing and reading, for example, Rebecca Solnit (2001, 72) likens writing to path-making, and reading to walking down those paths carved in the terrain of the imagination for the reader. Many centuries before, of course, Medieval European monastics already conceived of meditative reading – much like mediation itself – as a pilgrimage, which proceeds along the carefully crafted trail (or *ductus*) of a text (see Carruthers 1998). In terms of art-making, there is the example of Paul Klee, who famously defined drawing as “taking a line for a walk”. And in terms of the experiencing a work of art, one could cite Richard Wolheim (1987, 160–61), who speaks of the “peripatetic spectator” as imaginary walker inside Manet paintings. Similarly, in terms of our immersion in fiction, Wolfgang Iser (1978, 109 ff.) describes a reader’s engagement with fiction as assuming the form of a “wandering viewpoint” – an image extended by Umberto Eco

(1994) who sees the reader of fiction as taking walks, and very likely getting lost, in a fictional forest. Even Sergei Eisenstein (1989, 116), to name one last example, described cinematic montage as drawing the immobile spectator along an “imaginary path... across a multiplicity of phenomena, far apart in time and space, gathered in a certain sequence...” As is clear from these examples, I should add, the more fundamental metaphor at work here is the “journey” that invites our acts of “mind-walking”. It is ultimately because we inevitably experience our own thinking as occurring along “paths”, as going in “directions”, and as having “points of departure” and “destinations”, that thinking can so easily turn into a “walk”.

In view of these various entanglements between walking and contemplation, my proposal is a straightforward one: the same contemplative experience that we accept walking brings to people, Malick brings to the film viewer. If it is indeed so that walking “renders us more receptive to thought” (Gros 2014b), then we have in Malick’s visual obsessions with walking a special instance of the contemplative work that his style can do: it mobilizes and gives form to a recognized contemplative practice. And, on the basis of both personal experience and cultural association, viewers become more receptive to the contemplative experience that we expect from the actual practice of walking.

“Walking-With”

To say that the walking enacted by Malick’s cinema prompts contemplation, however, requires that his viewers be sufficiently “taken for a walk”. The question that my argument above thus leaves is: does the walking on-screen give viewers enough of an actual walking experience to harness walking’s associated contemplative effects? It is my contention that Malick indeed affords viewers a distinct experience of “walking-with”. Especially in his more recent, matured style, he ensures this experience of “walking-with” by means of two persistent filmmaking strategies. On the one hand, Malick nearly never films walking characters in a static shot, while, on the other hand, he persistently avoids presenting his walking characters in long takes.

Firstly, with his strategy of presenting walking characters only within a mobile frame, Malick allows viewers to be involved in his characters’ *motion* of walking. Here the viewer’s experience of

“walking-with” coincides with the camera anchored to, and literally walking with, a character. It is of course so that the mobile frame alone already affords viewers a definite sense of walking. Gallese and Guerra (2014, 106–8) note a general consensus among film theorists that Steadicam mobility establishes for viewers a sense of independent movement inside a film world. And, indeed, their neuroscientific study confirms that, of all kinds of cinematic movement, Steadicam movement registers the strongest motor cortex activation in viewers. Moreover, to attach the mobile frame to actual walking figures, as Malick continually does, surely enhances this natural sense of walking evoked by the Steadicam as instances of “walking-with”.

Malick’s camera walks with characters in accordance with definite rules. As recounted by Jörg Widmer, a Steadicam operator for *The New World*, camera movement is from behind or in front of a character – but rarely from the side. Moreover, in the following shots of Malick’s ever moving actors, operators seek to maintain the same distance from a walking character (Benjamin B 2006, 54). Reportedly – and quite evidently – Malick’s actors are also instructed to never present themselves in a way that squares up with the camera, in order to make it as difficult as possible for camera operators to film them (Guerrasio 2016). A character engaged in such a winding, evasive stroll consequently acts as something of a moving *Rückenfigur*. By walking in subtle twists and turns, characters draw the camera in, and so intensify the sense of following them and moving in close but dynamic harmony with them.

Throughout all of this, however, Malick and his cinematographers eschew the currently prevalent “shaky”, “Unsteadicam” aesthetic – synonymous with documentary-style filmmaking, or more recently director Paul Greengrass’ installments of the *Bourne* film series (2004–2016) – which would immediately draw attention to the uneven movements of the of the filming subject (see Bordwell 2007). By instead opting for smooth, unobtrusive Steadicam work, Malick’s moving camera puts the emphasis on the walking characters with whom it moves. This unobtrusiveness ultimately allows viewers a more direct engagement with events presented on-screen (see Coplan 2008, 78–79) – in this case, the effortless, flowing motion of the Malickian pensive stroll.

It is of course so that flowing Steadicam following-shots have become a staple of even contemporary Hollywood filmmaking. This makes Malick's second strategy decisive to truly differentiate his cinema of walking from the mainstream. This strategy involves a strict avoidance of long takes in favor of cadenced montage, which – crucial to the experience of walking that Malick stages – draws viewers into a particular *rhythm* of walking. Walking, naturally, is an intrinsically rhythmic act. And, like repetitive actions are essential to many contemplative techniques, there is a recurrence (of steps and bodily pulses) to the act of walking whereby it generates “a kind of rhythm of thinking” (Solnit 2001, 6). Walking rhythms obviously vary in kind. A long take that simply lingers on a walking character establishes its sense of rhythm by foregrounding the repetitiveness of actual *steps* – the plain succession of strides gradually grows into an aural and visual beat. Malick however elicits rhythm on a different formal level. Malick never fixates on single, extended episodes of walking, as one would typically find in contemporary Slow Cinema (see Flanagan 2012). His walking sequences offer only *glimpses* of characters taking a walk, never longer than a few seconds, and always presented within a divergent spectrum of images and impressions of the character's surroundings. In such manner, viewers are instead inducted into a rhythm based on montage. The “steps”, the sense of repetition, spring from a steady flow of cuts, jump-cuts, cutaways. Whatever the sights that viewers catch of characters and the camera taking a walk, they are always rhythmically punctuated by a range of other sights for them to also take in.

In this second strategy, then, we again see how Malick's depictions of walking function in close harmony with his penchant for impressionistic, disjunctive editing. In noting Malick's dislike of intercutting between two shots, cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki says that, “[i]n general, he tries to go A-B-C, not A-B-A” (Lubezki quoted in Benjamin B 2006, 54). This A-B-C principle of montage and scene construction serves to reinforce an experience of forward movement – as, for instance, in the C Company sequence cited earlier, when viewers are drawn along the unfolding path of the soldiers' march; starting in a field; moving through a marshland; then through a bamboo thicket; and finally ascending a plateau. Apart from granting viewers a sense of the rhythm of walking, the im-

pressionistic flow of shots in A-B-C form evokes the “visual activity” that walking invariably becomes (Solnit 2001, 6). That is to say, the successional flow of divergent images invites imaginative participation in the experience of “looking around” as an inextricable part of the experience of walking (see Benton 2017, 34–37).

Our “walking-with” Malick thus becomes a cadenced interaction with the places and sights that Malick sets before us – which itself is integral to how any act of walking fosters contemplation. For when we walk it is both “the *movement* as well as the *sights going by* that seems to make things happen in the mind” (Solnit 2001, 6 [my italics]). And, in fact, those concomitant things happening in the mind are evoked just as much – if not more – by Malick’s rhythmic, impressionistic montages. Many of his A-B-C sequences make viewers briskly traverse a succession of sites and sights so divergent that they can never be experienced by taking an ordinary physical walk. Yet by unfolding such physically “unwalkable” paths by means of montage, Malick does achieve a sense of *the experience of contemplation* – mind-walking, from one imaginary site to the next – that will inevitably accompany any ordinary walk.

My brief account of how Malick establishes a contemplative experience of “walking-with” has of course given prominence to the techniques of Steadicam following-shots and rhythmic, impressionistic editing. Yet it is worth emphasizing, in conclusion, that walking sequences in Malick’s cinema tend to mobilize, in unison, *all* of the hallmarks commonly attributed to his contemplative style. This is again well demonstrated by *The Thin Red Line*’s C Company sequence. Here the commencement of a walk – i.e. the depiction of walking characters reciprocated by the camera’s own walking gestures – convenes simultaneously the contemplative motifs of reflective voice-overs, cutaway shots that concentrate on natural surroundings, free floating point-of-view shots, subtle musical repetition, and rhythmic editing – much as one will find in any other walking sequence in Malick’s cinema. This suggests to me that acts and gestures of walking hold an anchoring, integrative function with respect to various more recognized contemplative techniques of Malick’s style. At the risk of sounding cute, one might say that the image of walking “gives legs” to Malick’s contemplative style. Walking allows a diversity of conspicuous techniques to assemble around a central and concretely familiar activity, perhaps

the most habituated of all physical human activities. In such manner, walking constitutes for viewers an imaginary space that correlates voice-over reflections with camera movements with music, in order for these and many other techniques to coalesce into an integral contemplative experience. Especially philosophical commentators would therefore do well to heed the extent to which complex Malickian evocations of “wonder” are orchestrated around a simple “wander”.⁹

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Notes

- 1 For a sample of the prominence of walking in Malick's cinema, see Thomas Flight's video essay, "Malick's Obsessions", available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5f6rpDlfX5A&v1=en>. Note that Flight's essay does not deal with walking as such. It simply presents general visual motifs of Malick – which of course makes it all the more revealing of the profusion of acts and cinematographic gestures of walking in Malick's cinema.
- 2 Walking has as of late been drawing a steady incline of interest across the Humanities – whether from the perspective of anthropology (Ingold and Vergunst 2008; Ingold 2010), history (Solnit 2001; Amato 2004), art (O'Rourke 2013) or, as is mostly the case, some interdisciplinary mixture in-between (e.g. Nicholson 2008; Coverley 2012).
- 3 Recent publications on walking in the context of film studies include Antunes (2012), Finnane (2016), Walon (2016), Schonig (2018), and Özgen-Tuncer (2018).
- 4 In this regard, I eagerly await Thomas Deane Tucker's forthcoming *The Peripatetic Frame: Images of Walking in Cinema* (2019). Seeing that he has previously published on Malick in the context of film-philosophy (see Tucker and Kendall 2011), I anticipate that he might have views similar to my own on the contemplative (or, perhaps even, philosophical) role of walking in Malick's films.
- 5 "It is hard to find the decisive, dramatic moment when things happen in Malick's films" (Martin 2006).
- 6 In a recent review essay that deals with the field of film-philosophy's attraction to Malick, I offer a comprehensive account of the ways in which film philosophers approach the contemplative nature of the filmmaker's style (Rossouw 2017). Though it is impossible to recount all those cases on this occasion, it is worth singling out perhaps the earliest and certainly one of the most influential examples in this regard: Stanley Cavell, who in the Enlarged Edition of his *The World Viewed* describes Malick's *Days of Heaven* as transposing "thoughts for our meditation" (1979, xv).
- 7 The only other stylistic hallmark of which a similar argument could in fact be made is Malick's voice-over monologues. Considering the searching, reflective nature of these monologues, they can be said to express contemplative techniques such as self-dialogue or self-examination.
- 8 An experimental psychological study focused on creativity has for example recently attracted some attention: it found that walking enhances creative ideation (a free flow of ideas), both during the act and shortly

thereafter (Opezzo and Schwartz 2014). Also see Ferris Jabr (2014), whose *New Yorker* piece covers further, similarly positive, findings.

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