



[Badlands](#) at [Cornerhouse](#)

Reviewed by [Anne Ryan](#) October 2011

Terence Malik's 1973 debut film *Badlands* is being shown in a new print at the Cornerhouse. It may be almost 40 years' old, but its use of iconic movie imagery taps into our shared Hollywood consciousness and introduces many of Malik's characteristic themes.

This is a story of alienated characters adrift in the overwhelming American landscape narrated by an innocent, who seems uncomprehending in the face of violence and death. These are themes to which Malik constantly returns, but here they seem immediately developed in his debut work and by following a traditional narrative, are almost more effective than in his later more dreamlike work.

Based on a true story of teenage outlaws, Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate, it constantly references the story of Bonnie and Clyde, but even more so the Hollywood images of teenagers on the run. Kit (Martin Sheen) plays the existential anti-hero as James Dean – an image that still resonates today. His girlfriend, Holly (Sissy Spacek) sees them as the stars of their own movie. The film seems to synthesise the common dilemma of a media culture where we see ourselves as stars in our own reality shows.

As one would expect the film looks beautiful, the wide-open spaces of South Dakota and Montana become a psychological and physical void. The couple's journey is filled with beautiful set-pieces - even the fire which destroys Holly's home is lovely, and there are idyllic intervals of

peace and calm – the treehouse where the couple set up home, the evening they dance by the lights of the car and the iconic Dean-like image of Kit, but even here the violence remains, his prop being his shotgun.

There are star making performances of Martin Sheen and Sissy Spacek as the iconic alienated teens. Spacek's affectless narration, her boyfriend has murdered her father and they are on a crime spree leading to doom, reflects the fantasy in which the two are living. The victims of their violence do not die, like avatars in a video game who are in the couple's way.

There is effective support from Warren Oates, Alan Vint and Ramon Berri, but it is the lost couple who hold our interest. They are indeed the stars of their own movie, and even as he faces punishment Martin Sheen answers questions like a movie star, or a Big Brother winner, full of wisecracks and bravado. Their behaviour and dialogue, especially the narration, echoes so many young criminals interviewed after riots or murders, who seek to express their emptiness in violence.

It is an un-missable transcendently beautiful classic and makes clear that Terence Malik is one of the greatest film makers of our time.

Note: A post-screening discussion led by Andrew Moor, Reader in Cinema History in the English Department at Manchester Metropolitan University, following the Wed 5 October screening of *Badlands*.