

Terrence Malick's *Knight of Cups*: It is impossible to learn anything from this

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Written and directed by Terrence Malick

Terrence Malick's *Knight of Cups* thematically and stylistically follows in the footsteps of the filmmaker's two previous efforts, *The Tree of Life* (2011) and *To the Wonder* (2012).

Making use only of small slivers of dialogue, the three films are composed of hundreds of brief, elliptical (in some cases, improvised—in any event, unscripted) sequences. The central male characters (especially in *To the Wonder* and *Knight of Cups*) wander around looking disconsolate for the most part, unsuccessfully or only tangentially interacting with their female partners. Human beings in these films seem remote from nature, from the “spiritual,” from each other. They long for something deeper, for more enduring relationships, but the detritus of modern existence and modern consciousness only gets in their way.

The “experimental” character of Malick's recent filmmaking lies in its attempt to dispense with a worked out story or developed dramatic relationships and to substitute for them the capturing of “the modern condition” through a series of disparate, contradictory, sometimes picturesque, sometimes perverse images. The results on screen, unhappily, are almost unendurable.

In *Knight of Cups* (named for the tarot card), Rick (Christian Bale) is a screenwriter in Los Angeles caught in some sort of existential crisis. He is being offered a deal that will make him fabulously rich. His relations with his explosive brother (Wes Bentley) and bitter elderly father (Brian Dennehy) are clearly unhappy.

Equally unsatisfying, for the most part, are Rick's relations with a series of women (Imogen Poots, Cate Blanchett, Natalie Portman, Freida Pinto, Teresa Palmer, Isabel Lucas), some of whom he seems to pursue to take his mind off his psychic malaise. Blanchett, Rick's former wife, is a physician, who tends to the poor and seriously ill. Portman is married and becomes pregnant, with unhappy consequences. Pinto is a model, Palmer a stripper. The female characters become dangerously interchangeable at a certain point, although this may touch on one of the

director's themes.

By now, Malick hardly makes a secret of the mystical-religious elements in his artistic work. Priests play relatively prominent roles in both *To the Wonder* (in which Ben Affleck and Olga Kurylenko wander around a subdivision in a rural Oklahoma town) and *Knight of Cups*. In the former film, Javier Bardem plays a priest questioning his faith, and in the latter, Armin Mueller-Stahl is also a priest, who explains why God inflicts suffering, because it “takes you higher ... out of yourself.”

In *Knight of Cups*, we hear the late John Gielgud reciting passages from John Bunyan's grand Protestant religious allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). Another narrator recounts portions of the “Hymn of the Pearl” from the 3rd-century *Acts of Thomas*, one of the New Testament apocrypha. (Malick is the grandson, on his father's side, of Assyrian Christian immigrants from Syria and Lebanon.)

The “Hymn of the Pearl,” also a religious allegory, tells of a prince in the ancient world who is sent to Egypt to retrieve a pearl from a serpent. However, he is diverted from his goal and sinks down “into a deep sleep.” A letter from his royal parents reminds him of his mission. He eventually snatches the pearl from the serpent and returns home in triumph ...

There are many individually intriguing images in *Knight of Cups*, of movie sets, mansions, sunsets, pools, beaches, mountains, the aurora borealis, women's bodies. There are moments, between the father and his two sons, between Rick and his former wife, that ring true or threaten to ring true, that communicate something human. The scenes of lavish or orgiastic Hollywood parties and Las Vegas hotels are striking. Malick also includes the homeless in Los Angeles and what appear to be lepers.

However, the separate fragments do not add up to anything intelligible in the end. They are not guided by any insightful, genuinely truthful and coherent view of reality and modern society. The viewer is pawned off instead with semi-whispered voiceovers (from Rick and other characters), or lines of dialogue, like this, “Where did I go wrong?” “I think we're not leading the lives we're meant for,” “I spent

30 years not living life,” “Dreams are nice, but you can’t live in them,” “You think when you reach a certain age things will start making sense and you find you are just as lost as before. I guess that’s what damnation is,” “How do I begin?” etc., or simple admonitions, “Go,” “Begin.” It becomes banal, tedious.

The style is nourished by the content, the social ideas. It is not possible to organize the complexities of modern life in the pauper’s bowl of empty moral abstraction and neo-mysticism in an artistically or intellectually satisfying manner. However, to offer quasi-Christian homilies in an unvarnished fashion is also not conceivable today. Unable to confront modern-day life and concrete social realities, but unwilling simply to preach, Malick is reduced to disjointed shards.

Unintentionally of course, both *To the Wonder* (which begins and ends at the medieval monastery of Mont Saint-Michel off France’s northwestern coast) and *Knight of Cups*, because of their intensely static and stagnant approach to life, end up in self-parody. One thinks to oneself toward the end of each work: “Enough is enough! If I am subjected to one more shot of Affleck/Bale walking on a beach (parking lot, empty field), or engaging in silent horse-play with Kurylenko/Poots/Portman, I won’t be responsible for my actions!”

In *Knight of Cups*, the modern world, for the most part, appears cold, sterile, consumed with triviality, soulless. The contradiction is that Emmanuel Lubezki’s camera makes much of it look gorgeous. There is a type of intellectual charlatantry involved here.

An apologist for Malick (from a French film journal) resorts to “on the one hand” and “on the other.” The “silence” of the film is, according to this commentator, “spiritual for some, and for others a testament to the desertion of the divine. At once ecstatic and depressive.”

And this: “The human body opens up the range of pleasures, but it is also weighed down, troubled by nostalgia for flight. Thus, on one side, the series of winged figures: mobile, unknowable women. On the other side, the underwater shots, childhood refuge or hallucinatory view of the swimming pool’s floor.” Or: “*Knight of Cups* celebrates these [female] beauties, the temptation of which it seems, at one moment, to condemn—but it ends up as an ode to woman-eroticism-energy.” This is simply sophistry. Any amount of jumble and confusion can be justified in this manner.

This same critic writes, “The pervasive disdain it has met seems to us (alas) quite predictable, but unjustifiable.” To borrow a phrase from Plekhanov, such people “regard themselves as the sworn enemies of philistinism. Yet in fact they are totally imbued with its spirit.”

In any event, this much is clear: Malick is not interested in a criticism of contemporary social life, he is indeed seeking to reactivate “the value of Mystery” (in the words of our French critic). Martin Heidegger (about whom Malick wrote his unfinished thesis at Oxford), the Gnostics, Buddhism—one can search here and there for the various deplorable influences.

In the end, Malick’s film does amount to a sort of subdued, indirect sermonizing. Why not simply hand out a series of Christian principles and instructions, such as these “Meditations and Observations relating to the Conduct of Human Life,” included in an early 18th century work by Daniel Defoe?

“Remember how often you have neglected the great duties of religion and virtue, and slighted the opportunities that Providence has put into your hands ... and then reflect seriously that, unless you resolve immediately to improve the little remains, the whole must necessarily slip away insensibly, and then you are lost beyond recovery.

“Let an unaffected gravity, freedom, justice, and sincerity shine through all your actions, and let no fancies and chimeras give the least check to those excellent qualities. ... Stand clear of rashness, and have nothing of insincerity or self-love to infect you. ... A little thinking will show a man the vanity and uncertainty of all sublunary [earthly] things ...

“... Love your friends and forgive your enemies, and do justice to all mankind. ... Let people’s tongues and actions be what they will, your business is to have honour and honesty in your view. Let them rail, revile, censure, and condemn, or make you the subject of their scorn and ridicule, what does it all signify? ... Be not heavy in business, disturbed in conversation, nor impertinent in your thoughts. Let your judgment be right, your actions friendly, and your mind contented,” and so forth.

How useful is this sort of moralizing? How utterly inappropriate it seems in the face of contemporary conditions!



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