



DAYS OF HEAVEN is a January, 2017 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Here's Kino Ken's review of that dvd film.

17 of a possible 20 points

*****½ of a possible *****

**Canada / United States 1976 color 95 minutes live action epic feature
costume drama Producers: Bert Schneider and Harold Schneider
Paramount Pictures**

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

Music Recording: Sandro Fois*, John Iles*, Sergio Marcotulli*

Music Mixing: Robert Glass, Jr.* Score Remixing: Michael McDonald*

**2 Music: Ennio Morricone*, Camille Saint-Saens*, Leo Kottke,*
Doug Kershaw***

2 Art Direction: Jack Fisk*

Set Decoration: Robert Gould*

Costume Design: Patricia Norris*

Makeup: Jamie Brown*

Props: Alan Levine

Sound Editing: Sharron Miller

Sound Effects: Charles Campbell*, Colin Mouat*, John Reitz*

Sound Recording: Glen Lambert*

Sound Mixing: George Ronconi, Barry Thomas

Sound Rerecording / Remixing: John Wilkinson

Stereo Sound Consultants: Philip Boole, Stephen Katz, Clyde McKinney

Supervising Engineer: Chet Luton (MGM)

Voiceover Narration: Linda Manz

Casting: Diane Crittenden

1 Acting

2 Creativity

17 total points

Cast: Richard Gere (Bill), Brooke Adams (Abby), Sam Shepard (The Farmer), Linda Manz* (j) (Linda, Bill's kid sister), Robert Wilke (Farm Foreman), Jackie Shultis (Linda's friend), Stuart Margolin* (Mill Foreman), Timothy Scott (Harvest Hand), Gene Bell* (Dancer), Doug Kershaw* (Fiddler), Richard Libertini (Vaudeville Leader), Frenchie Lemond (Vaudeville Wrestler), Sahbra Markus (Vaudeville Belly Dancer), Bob Wilson (Accountant), Muriel Joliffe (Headmistress), John Wilkinson (Preacher), King Cole (Farm Worker), Terrence Malick (Mill Worker)

A milestone film of American cinema, *DAY'S OF HEAVEN* was shot in 1976, mostly in Alberta, Canada. It remains a singularly beautiful epic recalling the jolting transition from manual to mechanized agriculture during the World War I era. Director Terrence Malick returned primary focus of filming to visual elements, eliminating non-essential dialogue. What remained was an inchoate, sporadic narrative delivered in New York City street accents by novice actress Linda Manz. That reinforced the vernacular sensibility of *DAY'S OF HEAVEN*. But at the expense of linguistic verisimilitude. For the screenplay indicated Chicago as Linda's place of origin, causing her actual speech to clash jarringly against listener anticipations.

Malick's simple plot concerns a runaway, hot-tempered steelworker from Chicago who heads hastily south after inadvertently killing his supervisor in an altercation. Accompanying Bill are kid sister Linda and Abby, the latter a young adult female sharing living quarters with the other two. They join wanderers riding the rails, ending up with a throng of wheat harvesters in the Texas panhandle region. Bill lies about previous sacker experience to a recruiting foreman, landing adult members of the trio jobs at a huge farm owned by a bachelor. He further introduces Abby as another of Bill's sisters. That ruse enables amoral Chicagoans to install themselves temporarily in the owner's farmhouse after other harvesters have completed their work and left.

Over time, farmer and hired girl grow fonder of one another. Bill encourages his lover to marry the boss, having overheard a doctor's judgment that his employer had no more than a year to live. Soon, thanks to the prevarications of houseguests, farmer and Abby get ceremoniously married, a situation bringing joy of legal possession to the groom and guilty remorse to his bride.

What follows is described by Linda as "days of heaven" requiring no work and exuberant accommodation to abundant leisure hours. Some of those Bill incautiously devotes to amorous engagement with Abby. This fuels jealousy when their host observes the pair engaging in decidedly non-fraternal intimacies. When he remarks upon Bill and Abby's inappropriate behavior, his rival prudently decides to leave, making stylish exit in a plane belonging to touring vaudeville performers whose risqué entertainment encouraged Abby and her paramour to momentarily shed discretion.

After attempting to intervene in order to avert future tragedy, the farm foreman is given curt dismissal by the man he tried to protect. This leaves Abby, Linda, and landowner to relish a period of isolated pleasure.

But Bill cannot keep away from a lost prize. He returns on a motorcycle, resuming the role of unwanted third wheel, furtively pulling apart husband and wife. Setting a horrible example of adulterous meddling for Linda.

A plague of locusts descends upon the land, hinting at retribution to come. Day and night, farm laborers and their supervisors struggle to save the harvest. Nocturnal warfare is conducted with the aid of lanterns, one of which a frustrated husband uses to swing wildly at his nemesis. On a second swipe, flame from the lantern being used as a weapon comes into contact with wheat, setting it ablaze.

Realizing all will soon be lost anyway, the farm's owner orders hirelings to simply let it burn.

Bill curtly communicates to Abby their duplicity has been detected.

Soon thereafter, the apparent cuckold, having lost all tolerance for spousal treachery, curses ambivalent partner and ties her to an upright. Then he sets out unimpeded with a pistol for a final showdown with Bill.

Malick's theme seems to be the impossibility of living a lie perpetually.

The landowner deceives himself, pretending to be Abby's real husband and lover. Bill masquerades as Abby's brother. Abby feigns being wife to the farmer and sister to Bill.

Only Linda and the brutally honest foreman are genuine, true to their own characters. They endure, though vindictiveness makes but a bitter reward for loyalty.

Setting *DAYS OF HEAVEN* apart from most other American films, before or since, is its willingness to seize upon ephemeral activities occurring on location and incorporate them as signposts. If a flock of geese happen to fly overhead during a shoot, then forget script and lock camera on avian flight. Malick's predisposition to pitch screenplay lines in favor of extemporaneous expression is utilized often, most notably in cobbling together an intermittent voiceover by Linda Manz, edited down from many hours of recordings. The raspy grittiness of

that teen's voice conveys additional realism to listeners, recollecting Italian neorealist antecedents to this film.

Among forerunners which might have influenced Malick are some works by the Swede Jan Troell, Francois Truffaut's *L'ENFANT SAUVAGE* (*THE WILD CHILD*), Hal Ashby's *BOUND FOR GLORY*, Akira Kurosawa's *DERSU UZALA*, and Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY*, as well as the island portion of Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'AVVENTURA*.

Between 1966 and 1972, Troell directed a reenactment of mid nineteenth-century Swedish emigration to the New World. Extremely realistic costuming, exquisite natural sound recording, and gorgeous shots of rural landscapes depicted an epic tale of flight and recovery. Titled *UTVANDRARNA* or, in English, *THE EMIGRANTS*, it clearly showed economic and geological causes driving Scandinavians away from their "civilized" homeland. His film was released in the United States in 1971, approximately five years before location shooting began on *DAYS OF HEAVEN*. A sequel, *INVANDRARNA* (*THE IMMIGRANTS* a.k.a. *THE NEW LAND*), picked up the story in Minnesota and California, showing family bonds disintegrating over time in the new country.

Thematically, Troell's diptych has nothing to do with Malick's opus. However, his emphases on silent communication, nature's majestic indifference, and frequent inserts of animals may have pointed the way to Malick's similar approach.

In his 1970 French costume drama *L'ENFANT SAUVAGE* (*THE WILD CHILD*), director François Truffaut told the story of Victor Itard's attempted civilization of a feral boy. Victor resisted refinements, having spent his whole childhood, so far as he could remember, without human interference. Truffaut, playing the researcher Itard, elected to narrate between scenes with a drily scientific voiceover. Is it just coincidence Malick saw this film and was inspired to hire its cinematographer, Nestor Almendros, for his own second essay into period filmmaking, one which also happened to make extensive use of voiceover narration?

Hal Ashby's *BOUND FOR GLORY*, shot in fall 1975 through January, 1976, pioneered Steadicam technology. It was notable for highly credible period costuming, superb makeup applications, and memorable Midwest photography.

Malick's **DAY OF HEAVEN** was partly shot by **BOUND FOR GLORY**'s cinematographer, Haskell Wexler. Was it any wonder its close successor offered burnished pastoral scenes of dust, clouds, and raging nature? Malick chose to highlight a climactic fire, whereas Ashby settled for a dust storm, but both were strongly committed to capturing scenes of nature's majesty. **BOUND FOR GLORY**, like **DAY OF HEAVEN**, featured a marginally literate central character whose pronouncements shaped overall sonic texture considerably. Both films placed a high premium on their skillfully devised music and sound backgrounds.

Another film which certainly impacted on **DAY OF HEAVEN**'s production was Akira Kurosawa's 1975 release, **DERSU UZALA (DERSU THE HUNTER)**. Shot in the wilder regions of Siberia, it related the adventures of a 1902 survey team from Russia tasked with determining a route for the future Trans-Siberian Railway. The group's survival and success hinged on the wisdom of an illiterate native hunter guide who had spent decades trekking through the region.

Like Linda, the central character in that Russian film had only a primitive morality and little or no formal education.

Both **DAY OF HEAVEN** and **DERSU UZALA** included campfire scenes, problematic because of no readily available supporting light sources. Their cinematographers chose differing solutions. The Russo-Japanese team placed a hidden artificial light within the fire zone. Nestor Almendros decided to take advantage instead of flame-throwing jets from propane cylinders to enhance illumination, according to his autobiography. That technique was supposed to provide superior credibility.

The montage of archival photographs accompanying opening credits for Malick's **DAY OF HEAVEN** bears very strong resemblance to a similar introduction in Joan Micklin Silver's 1975 American immigrant drama titled **HESTER STREET**. Silver's creation, reflecting Manhattan's Lower East Side around 1896, told the story of Gitl, a European Jewish woman who, after arrival in New York City, underwent gradual acculturation to American progressive society. The end result being emancipation from male dependency. Linda's like liberation in **DAY OF HEAVEN** echoed Gitl's. Each protagonist learned the hard way to shape her own future.

Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY, released in 1968, demonstrated the still vigorous creative potential of stunning imagery divorced from running dialogue. Malick's cinematic philosophy seconded Kubrick's. **DAYS OF HEAVEN** was intended to validate their shared theory sound cinema was overdependent on a nearly continuous stream of conversation.

One more film which could have served as an indicator of what Malick wanted to achieve in **DAYS OF HEAVEN** was Michelangelo Antonioni's **L'AVVENTURA (THE ADVENTURE)**, released in 1960. That Italian film included a waterspout scene, obviously unplanned, and extensive passages shot on a barren island. Sterile human alienation, divorce from rhythms of nature and other living creatures, elimination of romantic rival, midstream swap of sexual partner, physical absence of children from adult relationships, minimal conversation – all these were present in Antonioni's earlier production and reappear in Malick's **DAYS OF HEAVEN**. In both instances, isolation of humans in an indifferent and eventually menacing landscape led to estrangement from surrounding society and devastating self-centeredness.

There are plenty of unique elements in **DAYS OF HEAVEN**, however. Its music, for example.

Ennio Morricone's score blends a dominant melody created by inverting the theme of Camille Saint-Saens' "Aquarium" movement from *Le Carnival des Animaux* with original motifs ranging from a tranquil pastorale played on flute to the dissonant, pulsating wrathfulness of "The Fire" which accents Malick's infernal climax. Italy's veteran film composer also invented a gorgeous, melancholy love theme Malick assigned the farmer and Abby rather than counterfeit siblings. Leo Kottke's own composition "Enderlin" found three berths in the picture, twice joined to harvester arrival at the farm by train and once partnered with boat passage along a river. Another piece of folk music, Doug Kershaw's "Swamp Dance," was teamed with virtuosic tap dancing by Gene Bell, with Kershaw himself observable fiddling madly away in the background. Each of these pieces contributed significantly to the bygone folk feel of Malick's film.

Since the director lacked theatrical training, his ability to communicate specific ideas to actors was less important than their improvisational skills.

Linda Manz's Linda, Robert Wilke's farm foreman, and Stuart Margolin's mill overseer thrived under those conditions. Coming more from stage traditions, Brooke Adams, Richard Gere, and Sam Shepard experienced less success layering their characters. Gere was particularly handicapped, as most of his spoken dialogue scenes fell victim to editing cuts. Adams had to battle the same phenomenon, as well as a dearth of script details about Abby's back story. Shepard's paucity of prior screen experience showed up when Malick's relentless editing juggernaut reduced his scenes largely to reaction shots.

Giving equal time to field gnome, wild geese in formation, stiffened rabbit, and other specimens of wildlife potentially could wow the Disney generation of cinema-goers. True-Life Adventure sort of inserts, though, impede dramatic flow. Resulting in strong negative responses from certain film critics and movie buffs expecting conventional three-act plot development.

Most damaging among *DAYS OF HEAVEN*'s major flaws is the chasm between dialogue and scenery, a nadir being reached in a night scene leading nowhere. It features an utterly irrelevant obscene Redd Foxx joke aimed at stand-up comedy fans, hardly the core audience for *DAYS OF HEAVEN*. Vulgar speech wars with exquisitely beautiful cinematography. For what purpose?

Design and décor of the production's farmhouse is a singularly laudable achievement of Jack Fisk and his mostly Hutterite building crew. Resourceful appropriation of on-hand materials by costume designer Patricia Norris led to wardrobes that prove extraordinarily persuasive. Her hand-sewn outfits complemented superbly Fisk's recreation of World War I era furnishings.

Jamie Brown's makeup wizardry did a commendable job applying smears, grime, and variegated beards to convert otherwise patently modern faces into reproductions of vintage countenances such as are found in preserved wartime photographs.

Lighting and sound recording are extraordinarily brilliant. Technical accomplishment's evident in every frame, preserving unforgettably striking images and memorable, individualistic noises.

Two years devoted to editing result in a mixed bag of inspired juxtapositions and empty stretches resembling historical documentary footage. Sometimes the

central drama becomes sidetracked by folk performance intrusions, a case in point being the otherwise brilliant “Swamp Dance” scene.

In release form, the film wavers awkwardly. Is it morality play? Historical documentary? Wildlife report? Crime drama? Critics and audiences alike in 1978 had trouble determining what type of film they were watching and this difficulty remains even today.

Visually overwhelming? Yes.

Dramatically moving? Not really.

Humorous? Witty? Suspenseful? Infrequently.

Worth the price of admission? Definitely, if mainly because of uniqueness.

Criterion’s dvd release of DAYS OF HEAVEN includes the following bonus features: an audio commentary, with Patricia Norris’s contrarian remarks and Dianne Crittenden’s enthusiastic revisionism supplying a greater than usual amount of divergency in opinion; camera operator John Bailey’s twenty-minute interview revealing plenty of details about crew divisiveness and the shared lighting philosophy of Nestor Almendros and Terrence Malick; a twelve-minute video interview with Haskell Wexler communicating very little additional information; Richard Gere’s 2007 twenty-two minute audio interview clarifying the relationship between Malick and his performers as well as the vast discrepancy between shooting script and final theatrical release versions of the film; Sam Shepard’s 2002 video interview, focusing primarily on Malick’s improvisational bent and the director’s privileging of image over dialogue; an essay by critic Adrian Martin disclosing key background information about Malick’s career and cinema philosophy; and extensive illuminating excerpts in English translation from cinematographer Nestor Almendros’s autobiography.

Is DAYS OF HEAVEN mandatory viewing for adults and mature teens sixteen and older? Absolutely. It’s also arguably the most beautiful North American live action film drama shot to date, exhilarating affirmation of visual poetry’s compelling power.