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“Strangers and pilgrims”: The migrant archetype in the cinema of Terrence Malick

Abstract

The migrant archetype is a prevailing motif of the cinema directed by Terrence Malick to date: most of his main characters share the condition of being displaced or nomadic people. This article is focused on analysing six films –belonging to different periods of Malick’s filmography– in which this condition is significantly emphasized: *Days of Heaven* (1978), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *The New World* (2005), *The Tree of Life* (2011), *To the Wonder* (2012) and *Knight of Cups* (2015). The aim of this study is to reflect upon the central role of the migrant archetype in the works of Malick, showing to what extent the essential features of this archetype are inherited from United States mythology. In the end, this connection between film and myth is due to a common ground: on one hand, the thought of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson about the idea of America, revisited in the last decades by the philosopher Stanley Cavell; on the other, the legend of the first New England settlers, in which the biblical theme of exodus and the figure of the pilgrim are fundamental. Thus, I aim to prove how –and explain on what grounds– both in the construction of Malick’s migrant characters and in the mythic

representation of the American migrant the same feature stands out: the condition of “stranger and pilgrim”.

Keywords

Terrence Malick, migrants, United States, Puritanism, John Bunyan, Transcendentalism, Stanley Cavell.

1. Introduction

Most of the main characters of the cinema directed by Terrence Malick to date have a common feature: their condition of being displaced or migrant people. From *Badlands* (1973) to *Song to Song* (2017), we find characters that embody a particular conception of the migrant archetype with several variations. On one hand, characters undergoing a territorial exodus stand out, such as the couple of outlaw lovers in *Badlands* or *Days of Heaven* (1978), the soldiers uprooted from their homes in *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and the English settlers in *The New World* (2005). On the other hand, there are characters immersed in an existential quest that results in an inner journey or exodus: such is the case with Jack in *The Tree of Life* (2011), Marina in *To the Wonder* (2012) and Rick in *Knight of Cups* (2015), as well as with BV and Faye in *Song to Song*. As put by Rybin: “All of Malick’s characters embark on uncertain journeys” (2012, p. 139), which

present two dimensions that complement each other: “geographical and emotional” (McCann, 2007, p. 78), that is, territorial and existential, outer and inner.

In one of the rare interviews with the Texan filmmaker, published in *Le Monde* in May 1979, he turned his attention to the migrants he had met as a teenager while working for the harvest time in Austin; apparently, he took inspiration from them to shoot *Days of Heaven*. Malick argued that this figure of the migrant is disappearing from the United States popular imaginary due to urban overcrowding and the progressive absence of open spaces in the horizon of the new American citizens: “We live in such dark times and we have gradually lost our open spaces. We always had hope, the illusion that there was a place where we could live, where one could emigrate and go even further” (Baby, 1979). All those migrants brought to their farmers “a piece of their homeland and of new horizons and farmers sat down to listen –charmed– to hear the story of these workers.” Malick added that the migrants “were full of desires, dreams, and appetites, which I hope permeates [*sic*] the film [i.e. *Days of Heaven*] [...]. If they see before them another season, another harvest, they feel unable to build a life” (Baby, 1979). By means of these claims, the filmmaker was vindicating the relevance of the migrant as an archetype deeply rooted in the United States sociocultural imaginary.

The film analysis unfolded here serves a double purpose: on the one hand, to define the migrant archetype presented by Malick’s oeuvre; on the other, to discern to what extent this depiction alters or consolidates this same archetype as derived from the United States imaginary. Regarding the latter, Orr and Mottram coincide in defining the cinema of Malick as “inseparable from the mythologies of the American dream” (Orr, 1998, p. 173) or –in similar words– as linked “to a number of the essential concerns and mythologies that have been central to American culture” (Mottram, 2007, p. 15). At the same time, Rybin notes how Malick’s cinema articulates a “reflexive-mythology” (2012, p. 148), that is, it introduces a revision of some elements constitutive of the American mythic imaginary, such as the migrant archetype.

The chosen methodology stems from the double purpose that guides this study. First, the migrant archetype has been spotlighted as playing a major role within the American mythic imaginary in terms of film (Pippin, 2010) and literature (Anderson, 1990; Swaim, 1993), both considered as melting pots of this imaginary. Secondly, the essential features of this archetype have been identified as indebted to the Puritan literary tradition and to the peculiar adoption of this tradition by Transcendentalism, taking the classical texts John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (2008 [1678]) and Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (2008 [1854]) as points of reference; these features consist of the characterization of the migrant as stranger and pilgrim, along with the depiction of geographical exodus as image of an inner exodus. Then, the construction of Malick’s migrant characters has been analyzed in order to clarify to what extent they inherit the archetypal features here mentioned. In general, the cinema of Malick adopts the features of the migrant peculiar to the American mythology, though placing special emphasis on the disposition of the characters towards strangeness and inner exodus; since they are not linked to a specific national or geographical context, these two features invite the viewer to rediscover the universal scope of this archetype.

Considering the limitations of this article, the analysis of the construction of characters has been restricted to those sequences where the migrant archetype is clearly embodied, giving priority to the analysis of visual motifs (Balló, 2000) over other elements of film language such as the dramatic action, voice-over, music or editing. To this end, the present study builds upon some guidelines posed by previous studies on Malick’s filmography (Morrison & Schur, 2003; Patterson, 2007; Michaels, 2009; Rybin, 2012; Tovar Paz, 2012; Barnett & Elliston, 2016; Beever & Cisney, 2016). In addition, these limitations have led me to select six films of Malick’s oeuvre where this archetype –whether in its territorial or

existential dimension— significantly stands out: *Days of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line*, *The New World*, *The Tree of Life*, *To the Wonder* and *Knight of Cups*¹.

2. The role of the migrant in the American myth-making process

The analysis that follows requires a preliminary theoretical framework explaining the role of myth in a nation as young as the United States of America, as well as the place given to the figure of the migrant within this myth. Pippin's study *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth* (2010) points out how some of the films belonging to this genre contain an answer to this question. This author takes John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) as a starting example: there we find seven people of very different backgrounds and social classes travelling together towards the city of Lordsburg, dangerously crossing Indian territory. As noted by Pippin (2010, p. 4), this unusual situation suggests a further question that implicitly answers the foregoing: Can a group of migrants without a shared tradition or historic past, without the social conditions of nationhood, become a unity capable of something greater than the sum of its parts? In the end, this is a question "not just about social cooperation but about a higher and more complicated unity, something like a political unity. [...] Ford is asking whether a group of this sort could ever be said to form a nation" (Pippin, 2010, p. 4).

These insights are applicable to the films of Malick that portray the geographical exodus of a community, such as *Days of Heaven*, where men and women of diverse origins travel together by train towards the crops of the Texas Panhandle. All of them "are immigrants longing to participate in the American Dream, [...] culturally different from one another –to judge from the snatches of many different tongues we hear– but unified by shared goals, mutual aspirations" (Morrison & Schur, 2003, p. 54). In the light of these remarks it becomes clear why, in the case of the United States, the creation of a myth was oriented to fill the cultural, social and historical gaps that hindered the building of a nation or political community. Pippin summarizes it as follows:

Human beings make myths, tell stories about ancient times and great events, and call such times and events to mind over many generations, for all sorts of reasons. But many of these reasons are political. They help confirm a people's identity and help legitimate entitlements to territory and authority; they might orient a people with a sense of their unique mission (Pippin, 2010, p. 61).

The myth to give cohesion to this nation of migrants –formed in the second quarter of the nineteenth century²– was built on a 'great event' of the past that might resonate within the heart of those people and, at the same time, might bring them the promise of a bright future, a new start: the journey of the Pilgrims that, throughout the first half of the seventeenth century, decided to flee the old continent (i.e. Europe) and settle in New England (Jenkins, 2017, p. 10–12). This episode is enacted in the opening scenes of Malick's *The New World* that portray the English settlers newly arrived in Virginia in 1607, introduced in the extended cut (of 2009) under the title 'A New Start'. Commenting on these scenes, Michaels suggests that they echo "the idealism of the later New England colonists; indeed, the fleet led by the *Susan Constant* might serve equally as the Pilgrims' *Mayflower*" (2009, p. 86). Ultimately, the formation of the American myth is linked to the audacious enterprise of the Pilgrims,

¹ Some titles are therefore excluded: the short film *Lanton Mills* (1969), directed by Malick as final project for his studies at the American Film Institute, and the documentary feature film *Voyage of Time: Life's Journey* (2016), on the basis of not being a fiction film. *Badlands* and *Song to Song* are also excluded, taking as a factor of exclusion the (plausible) similarities between the female protagonists of these films and the female protagonists of *Days of Heaven* and *To the Wonder*, respectively (Holly is akin to Linda, Faye is akin to Marina; concerning the former similarity see Latto, 2007).

² This is a very broad topic that exceeds the scope of the present study. To learn more, see R. W. B. Lewis' classic study *The American Adam* and, particularly, the prologue titled "The Myth and the Dialogue" (1955, p. 1–10).

deemed to be a consequence of the European dream shipwrecked on the rocks of the wars of religion in the sixteenth century³.

It is thus inescapable to study the migrant archetype and its role within the formation of the American myth in connection with the Puritan ideals upheld by the first settlers. To this purpose, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* has been chosen as a key reference of the Puritan tradition. "For centuries –notes Swaim in her monographic volume on this oeuvre– Bunyan's myth has served countless readers as the most powerful literary expression of the essence of Puritanism;" thus, it is possible to "speak of Bunyan as the true interpreter [...] of the Puritan myth" (Swaim, 1993, p. 46-47). The pertinence of this text in a study on Malick is also due to its appearance in *Knight of Cups*, the filmmaker's seventh feature film: on two occasions we hear a recording by the actor John Gielgud, reading some fragments of John Bunyan's work that embed the film in a dynamism of "pull and promise" (Hamner, 2016, p 261).

In a way similar to Christian's allegoric journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City narrated by *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the first settlers that sailed to the coast of New England gained awareness of being part of a new episode in the history of salvation. As sustained by Anderson, the biblical account of the Exodus of Israel "had an irresistible appeal for the first generation of New England Puritans because of the parallels they recognized between their own situation and that of the Children of Israel, poised upon the borders of the Promised Land" (Anderson, 1990, p. 8). In this sense, before becoming a migrant or a pilgrim, the Puritan should become a reader; since only the persuasion of the divine promises –as contained in the Scriptures– could encourage and sustain her journey. "This Book will make a Traveller of thee" (2008, p. 8), writes Bunyan in the introductory apology for his story. The opening of *The Pilgrim's Progress* returns to this idea: the reading of the Bible prompts Christian to leave his home and undertake a long journey.

Although the reading made by Bunyan, and several other Puritans with him, of the Exodus account –mainly included in the books of *Exodus*, *Numbers* and *Deuteronomy*– is in turn mediated by the reading of another biblical text that became a landmark for the English nonconformists of the 17th century (Alcoriza & Lastra, 2003, p. 9): the *Letter to the Hebrews*. Here we find a synthesis of the divine promises and of the fidelity of those who believed in them, with Abraham as the central figure. In the middle of the eleventh chapter the author introduces two features that would later have a decisive influence in the American migrant archetype and, subsequently, in the migrant characters of Malick's cinema:

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country (*Hebrews* 11:13-16).

As pointed out by Stranahan (1982, p. 281) in his study on the debt of *The Pilgrim's Progress* to the *Letter to the Hebrews*, the relevance of this Letter for Bunyan's allegory (and for the formation of the migrant archetype) lies in the fact that it contains one of the rare references in the Bible to the term "pilgrim," which will become –as we shall see– a defining feature of the migrant portrayed by Malick. According to the lines quoted, the just people of the Old Testament saw themselves as "strangers and pilgrims," as put by the 1611 King James Version read by the Puritans. The original Greek text reads "*xénoi kai parepídemoi*," two terms that point towards the same meaning: on one hand, "*xénos*" is the usual way to mean "foreigner";

³ See Bercovitch's *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, especially the third chapter "The Elect Nation in New England" (1975, p. 72-108).

on the other, "*parepidemos*" is a more specific term, since it refers to one who remains in a place for some time, though in fact she is only passing through⁴.

The context in which these two terms appear implies that they do not address a permanent condition, neither a brief period: they both refer to a state that is to be prolonged as long as the journey –the passage– of the just people through this world lasts (Stranahan, 1982, p. 289). It follows, therefore, that the condition of stranger or pilgrim can only occur in connection with the idea of the journey understood as an exodus. In this regard, Alcoriza and Lastra explain that "the exodus is a journey, but it is also a progress; it is not just a progress through time and space, but a progress towards a destination" (2003, p. 18). In short, the exodus is a journey towards a new country and the migrants undergoing it hold the status of strangers and pilgrims as long as the journey lasts. Thus, it is understandable that the expression "strangers and pilgrims" would become a formula that condensed the Puritan experience; so is written in *The Pilgrims Progress*, when it narrates the examination of Christian and Faithful on their arrival at Vanity Fair:

So the men were brought to examination; and they that sat upon them, asked them whence they came, whither they went, and what they did in such an unusual Garb? The men told them, that they were Pilgrims and Strangers in the world, and that they were going to their own Country, which was the heavenly Jerusalem (Bunyan, 2008, p. 91).

All the aforesaid inspired the thinkers of the American myth in the 19th century; among them I emphasize the so-called Transcendentalists: Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, above all⁵. As R. W. B. Lewis affirms (1955, p. 23), Transcendentalism was Puritanism secularized or turned upside down. Thoreau and Emerson talk about the pilgrim in a tone akin to Bunyan; except that this time it is the American citizen –not (or not only) the Christian– who should aspire to become a stranger and pilgrim⁶. In this sense, the true American would not be the one who has settled down on a territory –"we [...] have settled down on earth and forgotten heaven" (Thoreau, 2008, p. 29)– but the one who, like the just people of the Old Testament, sees the promises from afar and preserves –in a constant tension– in her condition of stranger and pilgrim. In an essay on Emerson and *Days of Heaven*, Cavell⁷ synthesizes this ideal of the American citizen. As it is apparent, the Harvard philosopher is referring to the expressions quoted from the *Letter to the Hebrews*:

This was to be the land where the individual could grow freely, wildly if he or she wished; but it was also a place to which *strangers* could come to put down roots, the place to which *pilgrims* and immigrants come home. [...] As if sinking roots is not a matter of finding out where you want to live but finding out what wants to live in you. As if your roots –that is, your origins– are matters not of the past but precisely of the present, always, fatally. As if America could banish history, could make of the condition of immigrancy not something to escape from but something to aspire to, as to the native human condition (Cavell, 2003, p. 30).

In this synthesis of Transcendentalist and Puritan aspirations, Cavell is suggesting the possibility of giving a universal scope to this archetype. The filmography of the Texan filmmaker seems to have inherited this same concern and hence it could be affirmed –as

⁴ José B. Torres, Professor of Classical Philology (Greek) at the University of Navarra, made these clarifications.

⁵ Without aiming to elaborate on a theme that surpasses the subject of this study, it is worth noting the words written by Alcoriza: "The work of the Transcendentalist writers, particularly Emerson and Thoreau, involved the most prominent declaration on the need to require the American democracy regarding the aspirations that it professed" (2009, p. 142). See the entire chapter "Una nota sobre *Ciudades de palabras*" in *Encuentros con Stanley Cavell* (2009, p. 139–150).

⁶ In the case of Thoreau, it was precisely his desire to attain an attitude of estrangement from the world (and from himself) that which moved him to live in the woods close to Walden pond (Thoreau, 2008, p. 118).

⁷ Cavell, who died recently on June 19 2018, has been a great advocate of the thought of Thoreau and Emerson, as well as of a philosophical approach to Malick's cinema.

Lastra does– that “one of the first consequences of Cavell’s philosophy was the cinema of Terrence Malick” (2009, p. 113).⁸ In this regard, it is relevant to clarify that the migrant archetype analyzed in this study –synonym of “stranger and pilgrim”– goes back to a particular mode of understanding the American myth whose two main roots are Puritanism and the later Transcendentalist thought. This is, as will be seen in the subsequent analysis, the myth inherited by Malick.

3. The territorial exodus in *Days of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*

Having traced the origins and the characterization of the migrant archetype within the American myth, the following analysis will focus on the construction of Malick’s migrant characters. In the first place, the migrants linked to a territorial exodus stand out; such is the case of *Days of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*.

Regarding the first film, Morrison and Schur sustain that “the central theme of rootlessness –familiar in ‘classic’ American literature– is treated here with a self-conscious, almost academic awareness of its archetypal allure” (2003, p. 33). This theme is explicitly raised by the use of two visual motifs: on one hand, at the start, through a series of early 20th century photographs of Ellis Island and of street scenes featuring immigrants, which accompany the opening credits. Some of these portray faces of working-class immigrants, men and women, with European, Asian, Jewish or African features. The inclusion of an idealized photograph of president Woodrow Wilson in the series does not only allude to the historical context, but also gathers the other images within “the sphere of the mythic” (Morrison & Schur, 2003, p. 47), that is, of the American myth.

The series of sepia-toned photographs concludes with a snapshot of a girl sitting in a dirty and desolate street, gazing directly at the camera; some minutes later we identify this face with the character of Linda. As noted by Latto, this image of the girl, placed in relation to the preceding ones, “would, retrospectively, emphasize her role as part of the group of marginalized and poverty-stricken working-class people escaping from the city, perhaps hoping to find some ‘days of heaven’ in the wheatfields of Texas” (2007, p. 94).

On the other hand, the theme of migration is raised again in a self-conscious way through a visual motif similar to the aforementioned: the cinema screen. At the end of the second third of the film, the artists of a traveling circus –who stay for a few days in the house inhabited by the protagonists– screen the film *The Immigrant* (Charles Chaplin, 1917) for their hosts, Linda being among them. The camera focuses its attention on the gaze of the girl, as well as on the silhouette of her index finger pointing at the symbolic image of the Statue of Liberty shown on the screen. Chaplin’s film tells the story “of an immigrant facing poverty and subjected to a social hierarchy of power (echoing, in some respects, Linda’s own life story)” (Rybin, 2012, p. 18).

These two visual motifs place the narration of *Days of Heaven* in a specifically American context of migration: in the series of photographs, the diversity of cultures and ethnicities of the portrayed people –juxtaposed to the image of president Wilson– suggest the idea of a nation of migrants; moreover, the screening of Chaplin’s film, in whose shadows merges Linda’s own shadow, reveals an analogous meaning. Additionally, in both cases the character of the girl is embedded into the migratory context by means of two visual resources: the juxtaposition of photographs and the silhouette projected on the cinema screen.

⁸ In this respect, it is impossible to ignore the biographical constituent that underlies the connection between Malick and Cavell: Malick studied Philosophy at Harvard University between 1961 and 1965; there he worked with Stanley Cavell, who supervised his Bachelor of Arts Thesis, titled *The Concept of Horizon in Husserl and Heidegger* (1966). The feasible debt of Malick’s cinema to Cavell’s thought has given rise to numerous studies. Many of them conclude that “by filming the real and integrating it into fiction, Malick seems to have found a means of reaffirming a fundamental discovery which his former professor and friend, the philosopher Stanley Cavell, enunciated long ago: that film is a ‘world viewed’, throughout which reality itself is revealed to us on the screen” (Chaussard, 2017, p. 10).

In general, the three main characters of this film embody the migrant archetype; however, the unfortunate love affair in which Abby and Bill become immersed helps to center the presence of the migrant archetype primarily on Linda. In this sense, Latto (2007, p. 95) and Michaels (2009, p. 42-45) coincide in underscoring some similitudes between Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn and the character of Linda⁹, most prominent among which is a mood of strangeness and detachment with regard to the surrounding world that is mainly reflected in her voice-over narration: “Like Huck, [...] Linda is the narrator whose seeming lack of comprehension makes the social conventions and appearances of the world seem strange” (Latto, 2007, p. 95).

This strangeness, accentuated by the ironic contrast between the girl’s voice-over and the film’s dramatic action, turns out to be –as the story unfolds– a peculiar mode of wisdom: the one of the “stranger and pilgrim” that, by distancing herself from the civilized world, is able to see things that others are unable to see. “Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are” (2008, p. 118), wrote Thoreau in *Walden*. Thus, for example, Linda predicts, with uneducated but lucid words, the fire that will destroy the farmer’s crops; she also manifests a particular care towards nature when she utters (in her voice-over) that she would like to become a “mud doctor”¹⁰. Just like Huck, this character remains faithful to her rootless condition until the end of the story, when she escapes from a female boarding school with the friend she met in the crops: “the final image is one of Linda continuing her picaresque travels into an unknown future” (Latto, 2007, p. 97).

The migrant archetype reappears in *The Thin Red Line*, albeit in a different and –certainly– less “classical” context than in *Days of Heaven*. This time the exodus is undergone by a company of US soldiers landing on Guadalcanal Island in 1942, at the height of the Pacific Campaign. Though the opening of the film follows, in many aspects, the conventions of the war genre, these are soon altered –as noted by Pippin (2013, p. 249)– by formal and narrative strategies that constantly undermine the expectations of the audience: among them, the difficulty of distinguishing between characters is salient. The multiplicity of voice-overs, along with the scarce narrative evolution of most characters, are the causes of this difficulty.

Nevertheless, there are four figures that stand out above the anonymous mass of combatants: Private Witt, Sergeant Welsh, Captain Staros and Lieutenant Colonel Tall. The film articulates a confrontation between the former two, as well as between the latter two. Putting aside the particularities of each confrontation, it is possible to highlight some common features. In general, both Welsh and Tall are disappointed characters, whose linkage with the army is indebted to utilitarian interests: in the former the mere instinct of survival is predominant, while in the latter it is the desire to be promoted –even at the cost of human casualties– to higher ranks. In turn, Witt and Staros share a similarly serene and contemplative mood, detached from the brutalization derived from battle and the impositions of the military hierarchy; in line with the above, the film draws a connection between the aforesaid mood and their condition of migrants, conceiving this term in a broader sense than in *Days of Heaven*.

In this vein, Tovar Paz underscores a relevant visual key: “Witt is presented in the midst of nature before being presented in the midst of the battle. In principle, he is a deserter before being a soldier” (2012, p. 39). At the beginning of the film we see that he has escaped the army and lives among the Melanesian natives imitating their customs, amazed at their communion with nature. Even his way of dressing –without the military uniform, with a bare torso– resembles that of the natives. The days spent by Witt together with these people are a “brief

⁹ See the pages of Michaels’ book in which this author compares some fragments of Linda’s voice-over with extracts from the narration of the character of Huckleberry Finn in Mark Twain’s novel (Michaels, 2009, p. 42-43).

¹⁰ The dialogues and voice-overs are taken from the DVD original English soundtrack. See *Days of Heaven* [DVD distributed in Spain by Paramount Home Entertainment (Spain), M-13207-2001].

moment of open and contemplative reverie that is –as Rybin writes– in stark contrast to the rigid structure of the army” (2012, p. 28); a situation comparable to that of Thoreau, who recounts how he escaped civilization so as to learn how to live: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (Thoreau, 2008, p. 65). The presence of death –evoked through Witt’s voice-over account of his mother’s death– is also decisive in the case of Malick’s character. His life in the company of the native islanders “opens up for Witt the opportunity [...] to reflect upon the meaning of death” (Rybin, 2012, p. 29).

In other words, his condition of deserter, insofar as it can be considered similar to that of the migrant, acts –according to the metaphor used by Thoreau (2008, p. 21)– as a powerful press that squeezes the old notions out of his life and thus enables him to attain a valuable mood of strangeness before the world. Once recaptured and sent to a disciplinary outfit as a stretcher-bearer, Witt preserves the condition of “stranger and pilgrim.” It is palpable, especially because of his gaze, that he is not like the other soldiers; as Tovar Paz points out (2012, p. 88–90), this character is a stranger in the military *polis* (Charlie Company), just as the old wise Socrates considered himself a stranger in the Athenian *polis*. This characterization is shared by another stranger: Captain Staros, whose Greek origins are emphasized on various occasions. By rejecting the orders given by his superior (Lieutenant Colonel Tall) on the battlefield, the Captain reveals himself as a stranger in the military world and is soon dismissed and evacuated from Guadalcanal.

The last work of Malick that explicitly alludes to a territorial exodus is *The New World*: its historical framework is the founding of the first English settlement in America (Jamestown) in 1607. The opening sequence, showing the arrival of the vessels of the settlers as we hear the overture of Wagner’s *Rheingold* (1869), embeds the narrative in that “sphere of the mythic” referred by Morrison and Schur (2003, p. 47): not only in connection with the America’s founding myth, but –especially– with the myth of Pocahontas, which acts as a narrative pattern. However, “*The New World* is not a passive transmission of the same tired myth but rather a re-envisioning, or a counter-mythology” (2012, p. 148), as Rybin sustains. The reversion of the myth can be traced, precisely, in the answer given by the film to the question on who is the true migrant: it is the character of Pocahontas who embodies this archetype; not the character of colonist Smith, in contrast to what one might imagine. It is she who will discover, at the end of her life, a new world; in turn, the English colonists, as portrayed by the film, arrive at the coast of Virginia to impose the old notions brought from Europe.

Certainly, the young Powhatan achieves –as the narrative progresses– the strangeness peculiar to the migrant: her romance with Smith and her occasional gestures of help towards the Jamestown settlement force her father to disown her and banish her from the Powhatan people; she is later deprived of her dignity as she is sold to the English colonists by a neighboring tribe for a copper kettle. Once in Jamestown, Pocahontas undergoes a deep inner crisis after being told (falsely) about Smith’s death and, in that same place, the education she receives in the costumes and religion of the Englishmen makes her leave aside her roots. Finally, a second-wave colonist (Rolfe) decides to look after her and –after getting married– they both travel to England, where she dies from a disease. This summary of the character’s geographical and dramatic path serves to demonstrate to what extent hers is a vital journey of progressive detachment –or estrangement– from the world she had previously inhabited.

Returning to the *Letter to the Hebrews*, it can be well said that Pocahontas is able to cope with this difficult journey thanks to her hope of reaching “a better country.” It consists of a spiritual homeland: the communion with that “Mother”¹¹ repeatedly addressed by the

¹¹ Mottram explains that “Pocahontas’s periodic prayers addressed to ‘Mother’ are at the heart of the film’s religious considerations and are clearly linked to Ahone” (2007, p. 24), that is, to Powhatans’ great God, “who lived in the

character (in her voice-over) and whom she paradoxically discovers as she plays with her son in the geometrical Hampton Court gardens, far away from her native land. "Mother, now I know where you live"¹², she utters. The serenity and strangeness attained by this character lead her to the communion with that spiritual "Mother" she had been seeking all the time. A discovery that is expressed in visual terms using a camera that dances to Wagner's *Rheingold*; a musical theme whose repetition –it is played at the beginning and end of the film– invites the viewer to reconsider who is the true migrant of the story and, thus, what it really means to discover a new world.

4. The inner exodus in *The Tree of Life*, *To the Wonder* and *Knight of Cups*

The division here presented between territorial and inner exoduses in the cinema of Terrence Malick is porous and runs the risk of becoming a reductionism: every territorial exodus is –in the films of Malick– a sign of an inner exodus undergone by one or several characters. It is true, however, that the cinema directed by the Texan filmmaker from *The Tree of Life* onwards does not so much portray physical journeys but rather inner journeys or exoduses. In two of these films, *The Tree of Life* and *Knight of Cups*, the central theme of the inner (or spiritual) exodus is transposed to the filmic language through a series of visual motifs that have the same meaning as the metaphors used by Bunyan in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which are in turn inspired by some biblical texts and –in general– by the Christian allegoric tradition as depicted in the renowned engravings by Albrecht Dürer (Stranahan, 1982, p. 279). The emphasis of these films on visual motifs such as the wilderness, the pilgrim or the strait gate manifests their peculiar familiarity with Bunyan's book and allows us to speak about a shared significance.

In *The Tree of Life* and *Knight of Cups* we find two characters facing an existential crisis: they perceive their lives as devoid from any meaning and wander aimlessly throughout the world. Jack and Rick are anonymous characters –we only know their names thanks to the end credits– and, in this sense, it can be said that they are presented as archetypes of contemporary United States society: the Houston businessman (architect) and the Hollywood screenwriter, respectively, both with promising professional careers. But behind their success we find a life that has dried out. This contrast between wilderness and water is a thread that runs through most of Malick's films and has been studied in detail by Leithart in two analyses on the Texan filmmaker (2016, p. 55-56; 2013, p. 17-24): water is synonymous with a full life in communion with other people; on the contrary, the absence of the liquid element implies the opposite.

Thus, both Jack and Rick are symbolically presented –in brief inserts– going through a desert landscape: the former appears walking with difficulty throughout a rocky desert, trying in vain to quench his thirst with water from shallow puddles he finds in his path; the latter wanders around a rugged scenery, peppered with bushes, with the horizon closed by the mountains. Significantly, *Knight of Cups* begins with a voice-over reading the first lines of *The Pilgrim's Progress*: "As I walked through the wilderness of this world..." (Bunyan, 2008, p. 13). As Leithart points out, "the desert is an externalization of [...] [their] soul, which is dry as a weary land" (2013, p. 19).

At the same time, both films portray other kind of deserts –linked to the American capitalist society– that have the same meaning as the purely symbolic images of the wandering characters: the immense skyscraper where Jack works and the city of Los Angeles, especially at night, where Rick lives. The first place is described by Povedano and Samit –in their study on architecture in *The Tree of Life*– as "a prison with transparent bars [...] behind which [Jack]

heavens above and whose perfection was boundless. Alone had created the cosmos, the Earth, and lesser gods; had taught the Indians how to plant corn; he was the 'author of their good'" (Horn, 2005, p. 20).

¹² The dialogues and voice-overs are taken from the DVD original English soundtrack. See *The New World: The Extended Cut* [DVD distributed in the United Kingdom by New Line Productions, Inc., 2009].

can see the outer world but cannot touch it, cannot feel it" (2014, p. 54-56). On the other hand, in *Knight of Cups* the world of Hollywood celebrities –with its private parties, psychedelia and strip clubs– is described according to the specific features of the biblical image of Babylon: "Her cities are a desolation, a dry land, and a wilderness, a land wherein no man dwelleth, neither doth any son of man pass thereby" (*Jeremiah* 51:43). In this line, Stranahan notes that "wildernesses, which are traversed both by Israelites and by pilgrims, are frequently associated with destroyed cities in the Bible" (1982, p. 293).

Along with the image of the wilderness, *The Tree of Life* and *Knight of Cups* give a prominent place to the migrant archetype. In these cases it is not about migrants conducting a physical journey, but rather –as pointed out above– about two characters undergoing an inner exodus. Returning to the definition of exodus given by Alcoriza and Lastra (2003, p. 18), both Jack and Rick recognize that they are pilgrims on the path towards a destination. In *The Tree of Life* this destination is represented by the enigmatic doorframe in the middle of the desert –a visual motif with evangelical roots, taken from *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Bunyan, 2008, p. 14, 25-27)– to which Jack is led by his mother and his brother, as explained by Rothman:

For Jack, [...] finding a way to live his own life is the more pressing concern. Jack knows, when he speaks his first voice-over, that his mother and his brother had at one time led him to God's door. He wishes to return to where he once had been. Not until the end of the film, however, does he find his way back or, rather, discover that his mother and his brother had led him back (Rothman, 2016, p. 42).

In contrast to Jack's inner journey, whose end takes place in the symbolic seashore where he reencounters his entire family, Rick's exodus is barely initiated. "It is as if *Knight of Cups* gives us only the setting out of the pilgrim, only his recognition that a dangerous journey needs to be undertaken" (Hamner, 2016, p. 262). Until then, the protagonist has wandered about the scenarios of Los Angeles, having sporadic love relationships with several women, submerged into a sort of dissoluteness which the film compares to the oblivion caused by a deep sleep. Though, as Hamner affirms, some of the women characters act as guides in his soul-searching: these "women guide Rick with their statements and questions, they look into his eyes and press the reality of soul on him" (Hamner, 2016, p. 267). Della notes that, "We're not living the lives we're meant for. We're meant for something else"¹³; and, in a similar vein, Helen utters, "There's somewhere else we need to get to. I know it."

We also hear several times the voice-over of Rick's father, expressing the wish that his son finds his life path. This character once paraphrases, in his voice-over, the text from the *Letter to the Hebrews*: "My son, you're just like I am. Can't figure your life out? Can't put the pieces together? Just like me. A *pilgrim* on this earth. A *stranger*." The possibility that Rick undertakes an exodus does not come true until the end of the narration, when the protagonist's voice-over –accompanying the image of a road that fades in the horizon– says: "Begin." Nevertheless, the theme of exodus hovers over the entire film, highlighted by its musical leitmotiv: Polish composer Wojciech Kilar's *Exodus* (1981).

To the Wonder, made between *The Tree of Life* and *Knight of Cups*, poses the migrant archetype in visual terms different from those of the other two films. This time migration is addressed in its territorial dimension through the character of Marina, a single mother that leaves France with her daughter Tatiana and moves to Oklahoma, so as to live with her lover Neil. Within this migratory context, the first scenes set in the United States allude in an evocative way to the ideal of the Promised Land: the extensive fields where Marina runs with Neil, colored by the orange sunset light, evoke the image of an American Eden. However, the land of promise soon unveils its ills and deficiencies; these come to light when Neil, who works as a toxicologist, discovers the presence of lead and cadmium in the soil surrounding the

¹³ The dialogues and voice-overs are taken from the DVD original English soundtrack. See *Knight of Cups* [DVD distributed in the United Kingdom by Studiocanal Limited, 2015].

town. As Hamilton explains (2016, p. 9), the visual motif of the sickness of the land symbolizes the gradual deterioration in the love relationship between Marina and Neil, as well as the collapse of her expectations on finding a "better country" beside her lover.

In a manner similar to Pocahontas in *The New World*, the main character of *To the Wonder* undergoes a process of estrangement regarding her initial ideals of freedom and romantic love. The image of the open prairies –visible sign of a promising future– is replaced by the image of Marina looking at the world from behind the windows of her house, where she starts to feel imprisoned. In line with the analysis of this visual motif carried out by Balló (2000, p. 21–39), it might well be argued that the woman standing by the window manifests detachment or estrangement: the inability of the lovers to establish a home on the promise of a firm commitment turns the house into a domestic prison. Some scenes portraying the interior of the house confirm this idea: "Boxes are constantly being unpacked or, rooms stand vacant. This incompleteness becomes a symbol of the relationship itself, which also seems lovely but lacking" (Urda, 2016, p. 136).

Ultimately, the estrangement suffered by Marina places this character in an inner search path towards a country better than the one she imagined. The Edenic American landscape turns out to be a pale version of more profound aspirations: Marina realizes that her deepest desire is to attain the communion with a transcendent form of love that "presents itself as a mysterious gift in which human beings take part [...] Thus, the wonder yearned for in the film, that is genuine love, is not a human creation but something preexistent" (Fijo, 2018). In this way, the female character –enlightened by the presence of the other leading character in the film, a Catholic priest– embodies the migrant archetype as pilgrim in a distinctly biblical sense, as sketched by the *Letter to the Hebrews*¹⁴.

5. Conclusions

This article has shown the relevance of the migrant archetype in the cinema of Malick, from Linda in *Days of Heaven* to Rick in *Knight of Cups*. Each of the six analyzed films gives a special prominence to this figure, introducing significant variations that –above all– consist of a greater or lesser emphasis on the two dimensions of the exodus undergone by the characters: territorial and spiritual, that is, outer and inner. Whereas the former three films are focused on a territorial exodus –the migration to the crops of Texas, the landing in Guadalcanal and the colonization of North America–, the latter three are focused on narrating the spiritual exodus of their protagonists. Though, as we have seen, in Malick's cinema territorial exoduses are also paralleled by spiritual ones. In this sense, the physical exodus always appears as a visible sign of an inner journey.

This peculiar way of depicting the exodus and the migrant unveils the close link that exists between Malick's filmography and American mythology: film and myth share similar themes, such as the centrality of the migrant archetype and the way of portraying it. In the end, this familiarity is due to a common ground: the figure of the "stranger and pilgrim" –of biblical roots– taken as a synthesis of the Puritan experience that, some centuries later, would be largely inherited by Transcendentalism as a cornerstone of its thinking on America and the American citizen. Returning to the words of Cavell on Emerson, America was to be "the place to which pilgrims and immigrants [could] come home" (2003, p. 30), as long as they remained true to their condition of strangers, migrants or pilgrims, following the above clarification taken from the *Letter to the Hebrews* (11:13–16), whose words constitute a valuable interpretative framework for the cinema of Malick.

In this respect, the characters analyzed here represent different modes of embodying the same archetype in accordance with various situations and historical circumstances; in all of

¹⁴ To learn more about the Christian (essentially Catholic) conception of love underlying Malick's sixth feature film, see the studies by Fijo (2018), Camacho (2016), Hamilton (2016) and Urda (2016).

them their migrant condition strands out "not [as] something to escape from but something to aspire to, as to the native human condition" (Cavell, 2003, p. 30). It follows from the above that the migrant archetype of Malick's cinema, given its emphasis on the spiritual dimension –the willingness to exodus, quest and finding– rather than on the merely geographic one, is not confined solely to the United States territory; neither to those who, over the centuries, have found there a place to settle. On the contrary, what this cinema reveals to us as one of its fundamental concerns –in line with the biblical tradition– is that the figure of the migrant has a universal scope. It will always be, in an almost Socratic mode, a sting that encourages every human being to abandon her old notions and aspire –in the words of the filmmaker– to "new horizons" (Baby, 1979).

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