

FILM REVIEW

by Dr Philip M. Magri



Knight of Cups

Year of release: 2015
Director: Terrence Malick
Production company: Dogwood Films,
Waypoint Entertainment
Certification: 18

An artist often works to break down the boundaries of a medium. The artist's only tools are personal vision, an unrelenting belief in their work, and the need to convey it to an audience. Then again, an artist must also understand that the shock-value of their work might not only lie in the artistic content but in the manner in which they technically attempt to rewrite the rules, regulating their mode of expression. Today's cinema is focused on the spectacular, from the competitive use of special effects to weak plots meant for sheer entertainment. And yet, the cinematic medium has so much more to offer and to express.

Following on from *Tree of Life* (2011; winner of the Palme d'Or Cannes Film Festival), and *To the Wonder* (2012), director Terrence Malick's recent *Knight of Cups* is a portrait of Rick (played by Christian Bale), a scriptwriter in Los Angeles. Malick continues his artistic discourse by progressively breaking down all of cinema's constitutive elements that audiences are used to, thanks to most Hollywood movies: is it possible to produce a long feature

shorn almost entirely of dialogue, which progresses only through voice-overs? Is it possible to deliver a love story exclusively through its poetic spirit, providing the illusion that the camera possesses a life of its own by allowing it to flow freely around the characters? Is it possible for cinema to draw a bridge between the intimate microcosm of a particular man and the impersonal macrocosm of the collective? Is it possible for cinema to still ponder upon existential notions such as reality, freedom, destiny, religion, and astrology?

Malick is one of the few contemporary directors who willingly leads the audience down this unbeaten track. Impressively, Malick enlisted big-budget actors like Bale (in a role that is in diametric opposition to his 'Dark Knight'), Cate Blanchett, and Natalie Portman. The movie includes cameos by Antonio Banderas and Joe Manganiello. This is a movie about Hollywood, with a cast list of Hollywood A-stars, which seeks to corrupt the very world it seeks to portray and inhabit. Malick famously

worked without even providing a script, allowing the actors to play themselves in some of the scenes.

The result is an expressionistic and highly self-reflexive portrait of a decadent character inhabiting a decadent world. Rick reads like a character penned by Bret Easton Ellis, whose Patrick Bateman was also portrayed by Bale in Mary Harron's filmic adaptation of *American Psycho* (2000). More than Sorrentino in his *La Grande Bellezza*, Malick is here clearly concerned with how even intimate emotions can be misleading. His character Rick craves love and yet is destined to emerge, solitary and broken, from all his relationships. Rick treats his own life as a movie script, merely seeking from his love interests a temporary element of drama that might set the ball rolling for something more meaningful, which never manifests itself. Love appears and disappears, randomly, uncontrollably. In both form and content Malick clearly tells us that this is the life of the working artist—damned, romantic, aestheticised, and yet excruciatingly beautiful. 