



Paper Type: Original Article

Rhizomatic-Topological Analysis of Image in Relation to Desire-Machines in Terrence Malick's Cinema: Case Studies of Badlands (1973) and To the Wonder (2012) through the Lens of Deleuze and Guattari

Saman Sadr Eshkevari^{1*} , Faraz Fallahnezhad², Mehdi Khabbazi Kenari³

¹ Department, Kamal-ol-Molk Institute of Higher Education, Nowshahr, Iran; eshkevari.saman@gmail.com.

² Department of Performing and Visual Arts, Kamal-ol-Molk Institute of Higher Education, Nowshahr, Iran; fallahnezhadfaraz@gmail.com.

³ Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Mazandaran, Babol, Iran; mkenari@yahoo.com.

Citation:

Received: 13 August 2025

Revised: 10 October 2025

Accepted: 7 December 2025

Sadr Eshkevari, S., Fallahnezhad, F., & Khabbazi Kenari, M. (2026). Rhizomatic-topological analysis of image in relation to desire-machines in terrence malick's cinema: case studies of badlands (1973) and to the wonder (2012) through the lens of deleuze and guattari . *Perspectives on Art and Beyond*,3(1), 1-15.


Abstract

This paper examines the pictorial and narrative structures of Terrence Malick's *Badlands* and *To the Wonder* through the philosophical frameworks of rhizome, topology, and desire-machines developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. It argues that by breaking away from classical narrative structures and causal logic, Malick's cinema generates images not as representations of events or meanings but as productive configurations of desire and becoming. Within this framework, images function rhizomatically, forming non-hierarchical and multi-directional networks, while cinematic space is conceived as a topological surface shaped by intensities, folds, and transformations rather than fixed coordinates. The central problem addressed in this study concerns how the rhizomatic structure of the image, in relation to desire machines, can generate a visual continuum suitable for topological analysis. Three hypotheses are proposed: 1) Malick's films move toward a desire-driven and rhizomatic form; 2) the image operates as a productive act connected to desubjectified and multi-axial perception rather than as a representational unit; and 3) cinematic space in these works assumes a topological quality, where form emerges through dynamic surfaces and affective densities. The research employs a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical methodology, drawing on theoretical literature and close formal analysis of five selected sequences from each film. The findings suggest that Malick constructs a world of wandering, fragmentation, and affective motion—one in which meaning is displaced, subjectivity is decentered, and perception is diversified across heterogeneous visual and auditory planes. The films generate a visual continuum driven by desire, operating as machinic assemblages that connect disparate geographies and sensory elements. Ultimately, this research offers a novel model for film analysis based on rhizomatic and topological thought, expanding the critical vocabulary available for understanding contemporary cinematic form beyond the limits of representation.

Keywords: Terrence Malick, Deleuze and Guattari, Topology, Rhizome, Desire-machines.

1 | Introduction

The philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari is founded on the negation of static, centralist, and hierarchical structures. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they established a conceptual apparatus with notions such as rhizome, desire-machines, lines of flight, the body without organs, etc., wherein cognition, perception, and experience

 Corresponding Author: eshkevari.saman@gmail.com



 Licensee System Analytics. This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>).

are understood based on fluid and discontinuous processes rather than fixed forms and identities. Within this intellectual framework, the moving image, as a transformation of space, possesses a desire-driven process, an image that, instead of representing reality and static phenomena or even serving meaning, operates in connection with forces and processes of desire.

Unlike a tree or a root, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different forms (D&G, 2005/1980). A topological understanding of space and image, instead of focusing on fixed form or location, emphasizes the mutable qualities of discontinuity, passage, connection, and simultaneity at the level of experience, providing a suitable conceptual framework for rereading expressive structures in art and particularly cinema, that possess a non-linear and polycentric logic. Within this framework, the image is not merely representational but enters a network of radical connections with pre-linguistic, embodied, and desiring forces, a processual-productive rather than a static-semantic affair.

This article endeavors to analyze the poetic, phenomenological, and philosophical cinema of Terrence Malick through Deleuzian concepts, focusing on two significant films, *Badlands* and *To the Wonder*, as examples of a transition from narrative-driven to wandering-driven cinema a shift from causality to the connection of desire-machines, and a move from geographical and locational logic to topological logic. This is a cinema that moves towards a kind of perpetual becoming through wandering in asymmetrical spaces (akin to the work of the body without organs). These aspects have received less attention in existing studies on Malick's cinema, and the present research, while attempting to fill this gap, can shed new light on how philosophical concepts are realized in the language of the image and also reveal the specific way of seeing and the lived experience of the body in space that occurs through the rhizomatic expansion of desire.

This qualitative research aims to describe and analyze the narrative, spatial, and pictorial structures of the films using the aforementioned concepts, allowing us to move beyond phenomenological, existential, or aesthetic readings of Malick's works and enter a level where form, content, and the forces of desire are intertwined. The results of the alignment of theoretical discussions from written sources and the examination and analysis of the films in this research will answer the following questions:

- I. How does the pictorial and narrative structure detach from linear and causal logic and enter a rhizomatic level?
- II. How is topological space constructed? Space as a dynamic field of connection and disconnection.
- III. How do desire machines operate in Malick's cinematic image? Or how does the visual form of the films carry and generate this desire?

2 | Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Terrence Malick's cinema, from his debut film *Badlands* to *To the Wonder* and beyond, has consistently moved along the border of narrative and anti-narrative, representation and discontinuity, order and wandering: the camera in his films wanders; in unstable spaces where bodies glide and sound and image create a new order through separation and discontinuity.

Previous research on Terrence Malick's cinema has often situated him within the tradition of existentialist and spiritual cinema [1] or focused on aesthetic aspects, phenomenological narration, and the use of nature and light as meaning-generating elements [2], or emphasized the relationships between humanity, history, and the cosmos in Malick's cinema [3]. It can be observed that Malick's works have rarely been examined in an integrated and systematic manner using a theoretical approach based on the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari—especially with the application of the concepts of topology, rhizome, and desire-machines. Topology as a dynamic understanding of the space of connection and differentiation; rhizome as an epistemological and ontological model of relation, discontinuity, and the production of meaning; and the desire-machine as a non-symbolic and unconscious mechanism of production in pictorial experience [4].

In Cinema 1, the movement-image and Cinema 2, the time-image, Deleuze laid the foundation for a transformative approach: "We are no longer faced with images organized according to movement, but with images which display time itself, discontinuous, non-chronological, and condensed" [5], [6]. The theoretical framework of this research is extracted from these concepts to enable the analysis of the non-causal, networked, and fluid structures of Malick's cinema. Our analysis is based on the assumption that the images and narrative structures of the films are formed not based on the representation of events but on desire-driven processes, spaces of becoming and unstable connections.

2.1 | Topology: Spaces of Becoming and Mutable Connections in Cinematic Image

In its mathematical sense, topology studies spaces defined by relations of adjacency and the mutability of form. This understanding of space, in contrast to Euclidean geometry and classical views of location, was introduced into the realms of philosophy and aesthetics by Deleuze, shifting the perception of space from a fixed location to a transformative, connectable, and desire-driven flow. In the fourth chapter of *Difference and Repetition* [7], Deleuze utilizes the concept of topology to develop his theory of the structure and characteristics of the Idea: virtual topology is the condition of real experience, which does not follow fixed coordinates but is constructed from singularities and relations in becoming. Deleuze describes the Idea as a problematic structure possessing topological characteristics, wherein differences establish a dynamic relationship. To explain how Ideas are determined, he borrows from the differential and integral calculus of mathematics; the concepts of differential, singularity, continuity, and neighborhood illustrate the formation of topological spaces.

Topological space is a space in becoming, a territory in transformation, and shaped by extensities, folds, and echoes. This space is formed by the manner of relation and becoming of bodies, not by the location in which they exist [8]. When this perspective enters the cinematic image, it fundamentally alters the understanding of location, movement, and body in film because location is no longer geographical or symbolic but a topological space where the forces of desire and their mutable relations take precedence. In Malick's cinema, these topological spaces emerge through the manner of camera movement, asymmetrical framing, the use of wide lenses, and the shifting of narrative focuses. Instead of being "places," spaces in his films are territories in transformation. In *To the Wonder*, the camera is constantly wandering without following a fixed subject and, consistent with what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the body without organs, continually moves beyond its fixed boundaries and dissolves into space.

The concept of the fold (*le pli*) holds significant importance in topology because it indicates the zone of indistinction, a place for metamorphosis where inside and outside are intertwined [6]. The endless possibilities of smooth space render boundaries flexible and mutable, alter the relationship between inside and outside, and offer a model for continuous becoming and change. Deleuze utilizes topology to describe reality that, instead of a rigid and static structure, is conceived as a flexible surface capable of folding and deformation. He redefines traditional concepts of distance, size, and form by focusing on relations, continuity, and transformation. Therefore, the fold is a topological operation demonstrating how the outside becomes the inside and surfaces fold. The mathematical concepts of differential and integral calculus illustrate how new spaces are created; folds can generate both differentiation (differential) and combination (integral). The concept of infolding describes how the outside folds into the inside and creates new interior spaces. This concept is particularly important in Deleuze's analysis of subjectivity and offers a new perspective on the relationship between continuum and discontinuity: discontinuities (events) can occur within the context of a continuum, and Riemannian multiplicities model these spaces without reference to external dimensions or coordinates. In Deleuze's topological space of Idea and desire, an ontology is proposed wherein being is always in the process of becoming; reality is not a fixed entity but a collection of continuous changes; it is folded and refolds that create new spaces and new possibilities.

Space in Malick's cinema is a collection of folds, layers, and unstable regions: in scenes from *Badlands* where the characters wander through nature, the camera, instead of following movement or spatial oppositions, is fluid and unstable, and by folding space, transforms it into a part of the subjective, emotional, memorial, and desire-driven experience of the film. This topological view of space allows for the understanding of cinematic experience as a simultaneously aesthetic and philosophical process, an experience wherein the image is not a mere representation of events but a field for the display of differentiation, connection, and the becoming of the forces of desire. Malick's spaces are not geometric. They are passages and regions where feeling and location are intertwined and dissolve subjects within themselves [9]. In Terrence Malick's works, an active and productive encounter with space can be traced, which does not represent a dramatic situation; in *To the Wonder*, space transforms into a sensory power plant that engages the subject within itself or propels it towards flight. This space is not merely the background of action but is connatural with desire, memory, and lived experience, interweaving multiple layers of body, perception, and emotion. This topological logic is also supported by form: the fluid and soft movements of the camera in asymmetrical and unstable frames and the natural light of locations break down the objectivity of specific geography and give it a fluid, turbulent, and discontinuous state that is not merely the location of the narrative but becomes the narrator itself.

2.2 | Rhizome: The Non-Linear Structure of Desire and Sense in Cinematic Image

Deleuze and Guattari proposed the rhizome as a concept for thinking about non-hierarchical, non-causal, polycentric, and fluid structures. In contrast to the arborescent structure, which is based on hierarchy, causality, and fixed representations, the rhizome is formed by temporary connections, creative breaks, and decentralized multiplicities. The introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* states: "Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of sign systems, and even nonsign states.

The rhizome can be considered a structure that operates based on the connection of heterogeneous elements: any element can be connected to any other element in a rhizomatic network without the need for a structural or causal-logical telos. The rhizome is considered revolutionary in the analysis of cinematic images that operates in connection with movement, time, and perception because it can model their schizoid state: a shot or scene is not defined by an overall space subordinate to action or causal narrative; shots are a collection of any-space-whatever¹ [6] that are connected by the logic of sensation.

Therefore, the rhizome in cinematic image is a form used to model temporal leaps, narrative breaks, asymmetrical connections, and the intertwining of different levels; "Contemporary cinema increasingly takes on a rhizomatic form: a non-linear multiplicity of connections that reflects affective, nervous and virtual intensities rather than narrative logic" [10]. Contemporary cinema, which has distanced itself from the classical narrative model, is more connected in form and content to the internal network of mind-memory and emotion and defies cause-and-effect order. In Terrence Malick's works, schizoid narration, non-linear time, sounds that do not correspond to the image, and a camera that wanders among objects and bodies are manifestations of the rhizomatic state that is described in *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [11]: the rhizome is the logic of being-in-the-middle. The power to connect between layers; the power to leap and link.

The concept of the rhizome is applicable not only in the analysis of narrative structure but also in the formal examination of the distribution of sounds, bodies, movement, and even the viewer's experience in films, the cinematic image is a rhizomatic circuit. It does not signify; it connects, diverges, and continues in unexpected directions [12]. In this way, the structure of Malick's films can be understood as a network composed of forces of desire, interwoven times, changing spaces, and bodies in motion and becoming.

2.3 | Desiring-Machine: From Representation to the Production of Desire in Cinematic Image

The desiring machine is another fundamental concept in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari. As a reaction to the Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic tradition, it proposes a radical rethinking of the category of desire: a desire that is not the result of lack but is productive and, instead of representing a repressed unconscious, is a process of connection, disconnection, and flowing. Desiring machines are not metaphors; they are real. They are everywhere: in our bodies, loves, and technologies. Every connection is a machine: the mouth and the breast, the hand and the tool, the gaze and the image. Here, the desiring-machine is

presented as a fundamental mechanism for understanding the becoming of experience, image, body, and even technology. From this perspective, the cinematic image, instead of representing the Freudian unconscious or recreating reality, is a process constructed by the desiring machine in which image, sound, body, movement, memory, and space are engaged in unstable and temporary connections: Desiring production is not a metaphor for production; it is the production itself. Connections of real objects, partial objects, flows, and bodies form many machines.

In Malick's cinema, the narrative structure has sudden cuts, and we witness the interference or simultaneity of incongruous sound and image that lacks psychological causality. For example, in scenes where the female narrator (with an internal and trans-narrative voice) in *To the Wonder* speaks about love, separation, and regret, the images of bodies, nature, architecture, and light are not representations of love. They are the production of sensory-perceptual moments that engage the viewer's body; connections are established between the body and the image because cinema itself becomes a desiring machine and, instead of narrative or representation, is a collection of emotional connections, breaks, and intensities [13].

Similarly, in *Badlands*, which Guattari described in an interview as a schizoid love story, the relationship between Kit and Holly is not based on psychological interpretation and the logic of the connection of

Espace quelconque

desiring-machines govern their relationship: without a clear motivation or goal, they wander through nature in a series of indeterminate and desire-driven actions, and Holly's unemotional and mechanical voice occasionally narrates a scene full of emotional tensions. Desire is not something that cinema shows us, but rather what cinema does, that is, how it connects the viewer to forces and extensities that are in the process of transitioning from fixed and logical identity [14]. Here, the cinematic image becomes a production line of desire: the technological apparatus and the filmmaker's mind, the bodies of the actors, space, time, and memory are all components of a machine and create moments that draw the viewer into the circuit of desiring-production to connect, detach, and re-solder to another point. Desire is no longer repressed or reflective; it springs and moves from the image itself [15], and Malick's cinema deals with a form of desire that operates within the image and draws less from the outside.

3 | Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology using a descriptive and analytical approach, in which the dimension of careful observation of the case studies and the examination of relevant online and written sources are utilized to analyze the form and content and conduct a comparative analysis of the films from a topological perspective. In the following sections, we will see how the concepts of rhizome, topology, and desiring machine are operationalized in the films and how the form and content of these works can be analyzed in relation to Deleuze's conceptual apparatus.

4 | Data Analysis

Terrence Malick's 1973 film *Badlands*, his debut feature, marks a significant point of departure for understanding his radical trajectory away from classical cause-and-effect and center-oriented narratives.

Instead, he moves towards a cinema grounded in desire, rupture, and indeterminate connections. Inspired by a true story of a series of murders in 1950s America, the film narrates the escape of Kit (Martin Sheen) and Holly (Sissy Spacek) as they wander through the American landscape. What makes this film stand out in relation to the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari is the equivalence between action and desire, alongside the presentation of space as a network that is made of connection and disconnection.

4.1 | The Acquaintance of Kit and Holly: Image as a Desiring Machine and Space as Rhizome (Minutes 1-10)

The film opens with an image of Holly lying on a bed, playing with a dog. A first-person narration establishes the mental space and narrative, explaining the reason for moving to the badlands of Dakota. Subsequently, we encounter a bipartite structure: one at the course of the narrative and the other at the level of the image, which, instead of representing events causally, reflects states of desire. The acquaintance with Kit does not occur within a framework of dramatic suspense but rather in a completely calm, cold, and emotionally unburdened manner. There is no specific visual element to emphasize a romantic moment. This avoidance of dramatic emphasis allows space formation as a topology of desire: a space of indeterminate connection between two bodies, two desires, and two movements that lack a fixed point [11]. Contrary to the romantic plot in classical cinema, this connection is formed through the coexistence of communicative voids and aimless actions.

Conceptual and formal analysis: In this sequence, the camera follows the characters from a medium distance with slow movements, and the *mise-en-scène* is very simple and non-theatrical. The lack of semantic centrality based on action is evident in the aimless movement and interaction of the characters; it is as if desire is producing a moment without a past or future. With its slow and fluid movements, the camera is not merely an observer of the scene. As part of the film's flow of desire, it prepares lines of flight and connection for the viewer, and instead of inducing empathy or psychological attraction, it displays the mechanism of desire by combining apparent indifference and coldness with the eager gestures of the bodies in the double shots of Kit and Holly.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, desire-production takes shape with the first connection between gaze and body. The initial images of Holly and Kit's acquaintance establish rhizomatic connections: their cross-gazes and superficial conversation are neither the product of a narrative past nor a prelude to a shared destiny; the absence of a specific goal or destination demonstrates the initial functioning of desiring machines.

The city also transforms into a topological surface and space where the boundaries of public/private, individual/social, and even natural/artificial are folded and superimposed: the yard of the house has no boundary and becomes a flexible surface for a desire-driven connection in which Kit enters Holly's corporeality and life through playfulness.

4.2 | The Murder of Holly's Father (Minutes 19-29)

Scene description: Kit, having proposed to Holly and been rejected by her father, shoots him dead in their house and flees the city with Holly.

Conceptual and formal analysis: Kit has murdered Holly's father, but the camera does not seek to create tension and records the event with minimal movement. The editing in this section has a uniform rhythm, which, along with the actors' cool and indifferent performances, helps avoid producing a psychological association with the unfolding events. This is a situation that Deleuze [5], [6] refers to in his description of modern cinema: an image that, instead of following a specific action or representing psychological and dramatic states, displays a state of becoming. The scene's visual structure can be considered the topological embodiment of an idea in which chronological time is suspended, space is contracted and dense, and movement is detached from causal order.

The murder of the father is a line of flight of desire that violently breaks away from the home, law, and social order, entering an aimless becoming. Murder, as a line of rupture and a decisive cut of desire, is simultaneously a new line of flight into the extralegal and free state of the characters, generating new images: shots with cold light displaying the father's body detached from its social function. The camera looks from behind a wall or through objects, framing Kit in the shadows from angles that are neither psychological nor ideological. Rapid cutting of shots is avoided, and the camera moves slowly, as if still hesitant to represent violence or to flee from it. These are displays of the borderline and processual states of the desiring machine, in which Kit is not a dramatic character but a machine that desires destruction and freedom, connecting Holly to himself in their escape.

Although the moment of murder is a break in the flow of connections, it is considered a rhizomatic node whose contingency detaches the image from a cause-and-effect narrative and connects it to the rhizomatic level of subsequent events and occurrences. A rhizome may be broken and shattered at a given spot, but it will start again on one of its old or new lines. After the murder, new connections form between the bodies and the environment and objects: silent, emotionless, and non-narrative connections. The image moves towards a kind of traumatic configuration in which violence has no meaning in the form of drama and can only be considered a break from logic. Form does not have geometric stability and is defined according to variable topological situations.

4.3 | Escape and Life in Nature (Minutes 31-41)

Scene Description: Kit and Holly have built a rudimentary treehouse and live and play like children in the forest's heart before they are discovered.



Fig 1. Kit and Holly's temporary life in the forest.

Conceptual and formal analysis: The merging of bodies with trees, soil, the light of dusk, and animals evokes a return to nature and the unleashing of schizoid desire in the child. The bodies are no longer separate from the environment; the boundary between subject and object collapses, and geography transforms into topological space. The frames lack a semantic center, and the editing of this scene, instead of representing a place, depicts the process of the becoming of desire: a sequence of shots devoid of humans alternates with shots of Kit or Holly, providing potential for rhizomatic connections between these desiring-machines and the environment and with each other.

This extensification ultimately leads to the opening of new spaces that will connect to new points in the film's rhizomatic network. The frequently hand-held camera moves parallel to the bodies' movements in the mise-en-scène, like a line of flight, without a map, with variable and unstable directions, to enhance the sense of reality and presence in the scene. Consequently, the image transforms into a visual rhizome that produces meaning through non-hierarchical and simultaneous connections of sensory elements. Malick's camera does

not seek to represent the centrality of the subject but follows fields of sensation based on changing relational states, light or sound. As Deleuze and Guattari state, "Rhizomes are perpetually making connections with semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (D & G, 2005/1980 .p: 7); in this scene, the forest is a rhizomatic surface on which the fugitive couple moves away from the linear structures of society (family, law, and history). Kit and Holly live in the forest and nature, but they carry weapons and elements of urban life with them, albeit unused: a night lamp, a toaster, and, of course, the car parked and hidden under the branches next to their treehouse. Their rudimentary house is neither a closed nor an institutionalized space but an unstable connection that becomes part of the rhizome of nature; topology models this fluid space where natural elements and the human body move asynchronously but are connected. Here, desire is not a personal want but acts as a force producing new states.

4.4 | Encounter with the Couple in the Remote House (Minutes 41-52)

Scene description: Fleeing their pursuers in the forest, Kit and Holly arrive at a house in the plains; they become guests of the homeowner, and subsequently, Kit kills him and another young couple.

Conceptual and formal analysis: The simplicity of the house's space, the bright light from the windows, and the lack of color contrast transform the *mise-en-scène* into a flat surface, and the camera is almost static; only imperceptible movements, combined with the slow-paced editing of the shots, show the relationship between host and guests as temporary contacts of gazes and bodies: the initial connection of desiring-machines. The house abruptly stabilizes the rhizomatic space, but the rupture occurs quickly; this peripheral house is a temporary connection in the rhizomatic network of flight, and the host and guests, in an indeterminate situation without causal necessity in their adjacency, enter a transient relationship. This is what Deleuze and Guattari call an acentered or non-hierarchical connection: rhizomes do not originate from a root but are cut from the middle, form connections, and are cut again [16].

Topology, without emphasizing entry or exit, depicts space in this sequence as a fluid surface. The camera shots often focus on the actors' gazes. The concealment of all the characters in this scene, combined with the slow-paced editing, creates a space that, instead of moving toward the climax of the murder, neutralizes the psychological burden of the violence. Resembling a repair shop, the house has many objects and machine parts on its interior walls and is a turning point of the rhizome or adjacency in topological space, placing several desiring machines alongside each other. Kit and Holly, however, have already become war machines, and this station is merely a turning point in the path of desire of these nomadic machines: there is no victory or defeat. Simply a barbaric change of surface in the becoming of desire.

4.5 | Arrest and Imaginative Flight (Minutes 85-91)

Scene Description: Kit, arrested and in chains, calmly chats with the officers at the airport, and Holly concludes the narration.

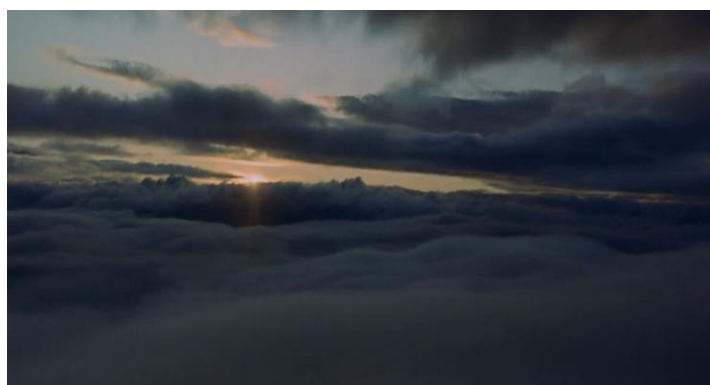


Fig 2. Kit and Holly's final vista in the airplane.

Conceptual and formal analysis: The long shot of Kit's face inside the car, combined with the off-screen voice, does not represent defeat but rather the sublimation of desire: the soft movement of the camera from Kit's face to the open horizon where the boundaries of space and time blur. Here, the image detaches from reality and transforms Kit into a character who is a sign of nothing; in Deleuze's words (Deleuze, 1997), characters like Kit are lines of flight, not dramatic subjects, and they depict the becoming of the desiring-machine. The final image of Kit can be considered not the end of a character, but the emergence of a realized desire in visual form: wide shots of the sky, the horizon line, and the stillness of Kit's face all display the transcendence of the desire for freedom and borderless surfaces. The time-image does not simply place the image in time; it makes time the internal element of the image (Deleuze, 1997/1985), and by moving beyond the action-image, Malick achieves the image of becoming; although Kit has become a legend in the eyes of others, this legend is not narrative; because it is multiple, breakable, and in motion without a center or destination.

Table 1. Summary of analysis results.

	Component/Film	Badlands (1973)
1	Narrative Structure	Incomplete detachment from classical causality in storytelling with non-prioritized connection of narrative episodes.
2	Rhizome	Connection and movement without hierarchy between narrative turning points and locations.
3	Topology	Schizoid connection of the body to spaces through wandering in impersonal expanses; Kit is shown as a war machine.
4	Desiring-Machine	Actions stemming from the characters' desires drive the narrative and connect with other machines, not a predetermined goal or purpose.
5	Mise-en-scène & Découpage	Open or borderless space, natural light, elimination of decorative sets; combination of bodies and environment with emphasis on abnormality relative to social order.
6	Editing	Non-causal editing and use of jump cuts in spatial transitions. Slow pacing in most scenes.
7	Camera Movement	Hand-held camera but with minimal positional movement.
8	Representation of Bodies	Bodies in motion and marginalized. Connection between body and weapon as a war machine.
9	Relation of Speech & Image	The entire film is narrated from Holly's perspective, but she is not omniscient. The narrator is a free direct voice recounting a memory.
10	Analytical Conclusion	The image transforms into a rhizomatic surface for connections and schizoid desire-driven actions.

The 2012 film *To the Wonder* displays signs of distancing itself from traditional, causality-based narrative structures right from the beginning. It opens with a series of low-quality shots from a home video camera on a train, seemingly accidentally capturing a flirtatious encounter between two people. Subsequently, the image quality shifts as we see the film's main couple (Neil, played by Ben Affleck, and Marina, played by Olga Kurylenko) walking on the sandy beach of Mont Saint-Michel. The location possesses characteristics of a topological space, with constantly changing boundaries on the shore: the ebb and flow of the tide, land and sea, connection, and separation.

4.5.1 | Mont saint-michel – a rhizomatic beginning, elimination of directionality – moments of suspension in place (Minutes 3-7)

The space of Mont Saint-Michel is topologically transformable and transient. As a border between land and water, the beach is a metaphor for the forming, intermingling, and changing boundaries of the desiring machines named Neil and Marina. Through touch, gaze, and movement, without the representation of a goal

on the image level, they are connecting to realize the desire "to be together." The desiring machine transforms and moves with this unspoken connection. Bodies touch each other without explicit articulation. This non-narrative and aimless desire is oriented towards presence, connection, and movement. The camera doubles the fluidity of this surface with smooth and continuous movements along the free movements of the bodies. Here, the image does not represent or narrate meaning because, if we view the plasticity of the image from a Deleuzian perspective, the scene is a plane on which desiring machines produce intuitive experiences of connection and flow. The Steadicam follows the soft and floating movements of the bodies in long and medium shots. Bodies free from a fixed position in a sparse *mise-en-scène*. This type of space differs from what we call geometric and fixed spaces because it is formed not based on the location of a place but on fluid and variable continuities. The flat space of the beach and the stone spaces of the buildings, staircases, etc., fold into each other, and this topological logic models the asymmetrical and non-linear adjacency of the edited shots.

Classical narrative structure gives way to fluid connections: sea and land, earth and sky in a temporary and changeable bond, and a couple strolling, pausing, and moving without direct dialogue or a plot. We see that the spoken and visual narrators, who are not one in terms of time and place, constantly fold into each other, and these adjacencies resulting from editing introduce the film into a rhizomatic form and logic. Here, the topology of the image directly reconstructs space as a changing state. There is no central and fixed space, only overlapping passages and wandering. Mont Saint-Michel is a rhizomatic space because any point can be reached from any other point. A space is constructed and revealed through folds and connections, not through the stasis of a place.

4.5.2 | Going to America – failure in connection, intersection of spaces – sinking into placelessness (Minutes 10-20)

In this section, bodies are not defined in relation to space; it is space that is constructed through the movement of desiring machines. Neil and Marina are not subjects who occupy a place; they are the nodes of the movement of desire in its rhizomatic expansion, a network without a fixed spatial center. This form of representing body and space is precisely the opposite of the vertical, arboreal logic: the tree starts from the root, grows, and branches, but what we see in this sequence is a structure without a marked starting point, without spatial centrality, without direction and purpose, which follows the logic of the horizontal expansion of the rhizome: the entire scene can be considered a turning point and a middle; as the shots have a multifaceted relationship, and in this non-organic and equipotent structure of members (shots), each can be a starting point.

The plains of Oklahoma and Neil's house should logically be a familiar and comforting place for him; Affleck's restrained body and performance also support this idea, just as Kurylenko's extroverted body and performance convey the wonder of encountering a new place; however, despite this superficial aspect, turmoil is rising within Neil, and also within Marina. Both seek establishment and stability with different approaches, but their internal and external situations are precarious. Marina is a guest and a migrant who has not become a citizen, and Neil is also struggling to find a solution to his job challenge. Neil's house, which was expected to be a place of stillness and peace for a romantic relationship, becomes a region of mismatch, alienation, and rupture in the film. The contrast between open natural spaces and closed domestic spaces that fold into each other creates an atmosphere that now reflects the inner turmoil and chaos of the characters.

However, These connections were established during the initial period of acquaintance between these desiring machines in relation to each other. They are constantly changing and fluctuating, leading to Marina's anger and departure at the end of the sequence. The temporal and spatial disjunction in the topology of this sequence, along with the absence of dialogue and the irrelevance of most voice-overs to what we see in the image, shows the subjectivity of space. In recollection, memories fold and do not unfold linearly. Instead of showing the linear progression of memory from place to place, Malick displays the form of the subjective experience of remembering. They walk in silence, touch, and look, but they never settle in space, and the

camera, with soft movements, constantly pursues the bodies to maintain the sense of instability and fluidity of the subject.

The editing lacks temporal narrative continuity, and the shots are placed next to each other based on emotional adjacencies, not based on cause and effect or linear sequence in time. This type of editing exemplifies the topological logic in the visual structure of Malick's cinema, where adjacency is more important than linear succession, and the relationships between moments are established based on the creative and transient force of desire rather than temporal precedence.

Formal elements: The fluid movement of the woman's body in the static and still domestic space, the restless rotations of the camera in bright spaces with natural and still external light transform space from a place of settlement into a topological region for the wandering of desiring machines. They cannot become one with the environment. There is also no central character driving the narrative and the story, and the schizoid connections between Marina, her daughter, Neil, and the environment advance the film while revealing the instability of their bond. Desire is always fleeing, but flight itself is another form of connection [16]. The characters are suspended in this space, a surface whose new connection is neither fully established nor connected to the past.

We see that, besides folding the characters' inner spaces into each other, the environment also folds into Neil and Marina's inner space, and the resulting topological space, despite the characters' apparent goals, lacks a center and function and is very fragile. The characters' emotional bonds with each other become unstable, and the bodies are wandering; the seemingly disjointed visual spaces create a rhizomatic surface through their connection in editing, and the characters' desire for life gives it continuity.

The priest and the crisis of faith – disjunction of sound and image (Minutes 77-83)



Fig 3. The priest visits prisoners.

The semantic layers of the film are amplified by the supporting character of Father Quintana, a figure in silence and crisis, searching for a meaning that seems to have vanished. Quintana's crisis is revealed more through the camera's inquisitive gaze than through his beliefs in the form of internal monologues, which often do not align with what we see in the image. This asymmetry between sound and image, or what Deleuze calls "the break between the visual image and the sound image" [17], is a moment when the causal order of the narrative collapses, and the image, instead of depicting knowledge, becomes a scene of becoming. The priest, like Marina, does not carry a meaning but is a desiring machine that displays his lived experience of an apparatus. Like the woman, he desires movement but is plagued by doubt, which contradicts his daily existence. His difference from the woman lies in the fact that his crisis of faith emerges in his internal dialogue and the undulating movements of the camera in shots where the body still reflects his desire to escape his internal catatonia.

In the form of the image, we observe that sound and image do not proceed simultaneously. The camera does not follow the priest's body, and as he leaves the church, his monologues are abruptly interrupted by non-chronological editing and temporal/spatial jumps to images of everyday life. This discontinuity between dimensions of experience and between sound and image is the topological presentation of desire, in which

we witness the crisis and departure of the priest's desiring machine from the traditional apparatus of faith. In the rhizomatic logic of image connection, the priest is neither the center of the narrative nor the bearer of meaning; he is part of a generative field that moves by producing difference.

The skeptical and unable-to-connect character of the priest is one of the film's narrative lines that functions like a body without organs, the carrier of a decentered desire that folds sound and image together. The priest's voice wells up from within: "Lord, where are you?" and the image shifts from the church to houses, children, streets, and the sky. This mismatch in time and space is a characteristic of topological space and its rhizomatic expansion: the incompatibility of spaces and surfaces and, at the same time, their implicit connection. The priest, as a desiring machine in crisis, does not represent a dramatic transition from a social institution, but his image displays a borderline state where desire shifts towards a new and not necessarily ultimate position.

4.5.3 | The Woman's separation and return from france – line of flight of desire – interruption in connection (Minutes 57-63)

The return from France is a kind of departure from the previous order, not a nostalgic return. This line of flight aims not to reconstruct the relationship but to escape the blockage of desire within the film's rhizomatic network. The space is mostly urban but presented as a collection of disconnected connections, and the editing continues to immerse shots within each other without temporal reference. Spaces are constructed and ordered not according to location but through Marina's unstable emotions, a desiring machine whose emotional relationship is no longer sufficient to produce meaning in her life and whose body's movement, wandering, and passage create space, both as an atmosphere and a spatial surface.

Formal elements: The woman's body, moving through the city without a specific *mise-en-scène*, lacks dramatic function. The unexplained jump cuts in editing and the narrative distinction in time and space provide an image of a desiring machine in the process of jumping, connecting, and separating: without seeking a center or an ultimate goal, it wants to exit the previous desiring apparatus.

In the topology of the image, the trip to France is a line of flight, a cut in the surface of connection where the woman's body is a surface passing through states, not a subject carrying interiority. The return to America does not represent a form of romanticism or the repair of the relationship. The topology of the disconnected images here shows a continuous pattern: shots of Marina's aimless wandering in the streets are lines of flight without a center or a starting and ending point, whose force of desire moves them within a rhizomatic network.

4.5.4 | Dissolving bodies, dominance of nature – desire for formlessness (Ending)

In the final section, the body becomes appended to the image of nature. As a desiring machine, the camera passes beyond the human subject and focuses on objects, trees, light, and water. The image reaches its ultimate point: the display of an apparatus without centrality in the subject, without representation of anything, consisting only of components in the process of connection and disconnection. From a topological perspective, space has a continuous state. However, any point on the surface of the image can be the center, and any moment can be the beginning of an unrepeatable movement. The film concludes with a desolate and slightly eerie shot of Mont Saint-Michel, the topological region of the film's beginning.



Fig 4. The Film's Final Scene.

Formal elements: In the end, the topology of the image moves towards the elimination of the human subject and the dispersal of meaning; Marina is in America and remembers Mont Saint-Michel; the body appended to the image gradually recedes, and a folded nature remains: a rhizomatic surface that the image, as a desiring-machine, has constructed and can reproduce itself without repetition and in an endless becoming.

The image and its rhizomatic network of connections model the becoming of the world itself: “Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree... Becoming is always of a different order than imitation” [17]. Becoming is always to move outward, from identity to difference, from center to periphery.

Table 2. Summary of analysis results.

	Component/Film	To the Wonder (2012)
1	Narrative Structure	Almost complete elimination of causality; non-linear and subjective narration of intuition and emotion.
2	Rhizome	Emotional ruptures and desire-driven passages and connections between spaces and characters.
3	Topology	The transition from geometric space to continuous spaces based on perception.
4	Desiring-Machine	Image and body have become flows of desire and have a reciprocal influence on each other.
5	Mise-en-scène	Combination of body and natural open space light, spaces defined in contrast to the chaos of interior domestic space.
6	Découpage	Fluid shots without découpage; moving camera establishes soft connections.
7	Editing	Associative Editing. Disruption of chronological time with emphasis on simultaneity and emotional association.
8	Representation of Bodies	Bodies in wandering and in relation to light and space, bodies that are not the center of gravity of meaning but moments of passage and connection.
9	Relation of Speech & Image	Elimination of dialogues and narration through voice-over and internal monologue. The gap between image and sound in order to create a non-representational image.
10	Analytical Conclusion	The image is the desiring machine itself; space, body, movement, and editing have constructed a rhizomatic topological surface.

4.5.5 | A comparative look at the conceptual-formal results of two films and the trajectory of terrence malick's vision

The foldings of characters and environment in *Badlands* are more metaphorical, displaying the desire for confrontation between war machines and their surroundings. However, in *To the Wonder*, the foldings of space are more reflective of the character's subjectivity. In *Badlands*, we witness an objective depiction of the becoming of desire in nomadic and war machines, while in *To the Wonder*, we follow the subjective experience of the characters' own becoming of desire.

Badlands stands at the border between an arborescent narrative and a rhizomatic form, but *To the Wonder* fully immerses itself in the rhizome. In both films, natural spaces function beyond mere locations, but in *To the Wonder*, these spaces acquire a topological state entirely. In *Badlands*, Holly's internal voice folds into the scene's dialogues, giving the film a structure similar to the narration of memory, and we see Holly's explanations and interpretations of her recollection. However, in *To the Wonder*, we witness the memory itself as it is present or passes through the characters' minds. The camera in *Badlands*, although hand-held, does not change angles frequently, but the camera in *To the Wonder* is much more fluid and constantly shifts focus and perspective. This visual characteristic of *To the Wonder*, in comparison to the lesser mobility of the *Badlands* camera, does not allow the viewer's gaze to settle, bringing the film viewing experience closer to being present in the scene: we do not think about the characters; we are simply with them, and the film engages with our emotions.

Table 3. Comparison of key structures in the two films.

Feature	<i>Badlands</i>	<i>To the Wonder</i>
1 Narrative form	Quasi-classical – gradual collapse	Collapsed from the beginning
2 Logic of space	Locational – topological	Entirely topological
3 Narration	Causality with gradual ruptures	Scattered monologues, time jumps
4 Character identity	Formed through integration	In constant becoming
5 Model of desire	Protest against society and search for freedom	Search for connection and peace

5 | Conclusion

Deleuze and Guattari employed the mathematical concepts of topology and the rhizome in a new mode of thinking that, instead of focusing on essences, centers on relation and connection, emphasizing continuous transformation. It understands space not as a spatial distance but based on contiguity and adjacency, where specific points or events possess singularity. A key concept is the fold, a topological operation that pulls the outer surface inward and vice versa, a process that establishes a kind of continuity between the inside and the outside. Inspired by Leibniz, Deleuze describes monads as infinite folds [6]; each monad has an inner world in which the entire universe is folded. On the other hand, the fold is a metaphor for continuity and non-rupture. When we fold a piece of paper, two previously distant points come together without tearing the surface. Of course, folding is not a repetitive mechanical operation; each fold creates a new difference and complexity that can even be used to explain the complexity of time: past and present are folded into each other, creating a temporal continuum.

The analysis results indicate that in the two films studied in this research, the rhizomatic structure of the image, in connection with desiring machines, has created a visual continuum, a desire-driven continuum structured by ruptures in classical narration. In the films *Badlands* and *To the Wonder*, the image does not merely represent meaning or event; rather, it possesses a productive function in relation to the desiring machine, in which perception is multi-axial. The configuration of space in these films can be analyzed through the topological perspective of Deleuze and Guattari, transforming the stasis of location into the mobility of a surface composed of nodes that are intensified at certain points or denser by folds. Folds in space and rhizomatic connections are in formal and conceptual harmony with the memory-driven and subjective narration of the films because the eruption of memory and recollection in humans occurs precisely in this

way: schizoid images that connect illogically and haphazardly create the continuous state of memory. The image, as something composed of parts and form, is a machine that desires connection. Furthermore, image surfaces can carry leaps of desire and display its movement; in other words, beyond merely showing the movement of desire, the image also has the power to produce desire. As mentioned, folding is a topological operation that provides a potential for modeling complexity, multiplicity, and continuity, allowing us to redefine traditional philosophical dualisms such as inside/outside, sense/meaning, and mind/body and to show their continuity and interdependence instead of opposition. These two films are formed by the integration of disconnected parts and surfaces: it can be said that the totality of each film is a mapping of the rhizome-shaped surface formed by the becoming of desiring-machines, and despite their schizoid and apparent discontinuity, the act of folding in editing creates the continuum of the film's world. In Malick's cinema, the viewer can also play an active role in creating this continuity.

References

- [1] Beugnet, M. (2011). *Cinema and sensation: French film and the art of transgression*. Southern Illinois University Press. https://www.google.com/books/edition/Cinema_and_Sensation/T3VdU4IqEJYC?hl=en&gbpv=0
- [2] Plantinga, C. (2009). *Moving viewers: American film and the spectator's experience*. Moving viewers: American film and the spectator's experience. https://www.google.com/books/edition/Moving_Viewers/wjyFDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0
- [3] Barnett, C. B., & Elliston, C. J. (2016). *Theology and the films of Terrence Malick*. New York: Routledge. <https://api.taylorfrancis.com/content/books/mono/download?identifierName=doi&identifierValue=10.4324/9781315743158&type=googlepdf>
- [4] Goodchild, P. (1996). *Deleuze and Guattari: An introduction to the politics of desire*. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://www.torrossa.com/gs/resourceProxy?an=5017443&publisher=FZ7200>
- [5] Deleuze, G. (1997). *Cinema 1, the movement-image*. University of Minnesota Press. https://monoskop.org/images/8/80/Deleuze_Gilles_Cinema_1_Movement-Image.pdf
- [6] Deleuze, G. (1993). *The fold: Leibniz and the baroque*. University of Minnesota Press. <https://www.upress.umn.edu/9780816616015/the-fold/>
- [7] Deleuze, G. (1994). *Difference and repetition*. Columbia University Press. <https://dokumen.pub/difference-and-repetition-revised-0231081588-9780231081580.html>
- [8] Grosz, E. (2008). *Chaos, Territory, Art*. Columbia University Press. https://www.google.com/books/edition/Chaos_Territory_Art/OWd-Q8a2n2UC?hl=en&gbpv=0
- [9] Corrigan, T. (2010). *The essay film as a cinema of ideas*. New York: Columbia University Press. <https://bpb-ap-se2.wpmucdn.com/mediafactory.org.au/dist/c/679/files/2016/07/EssayFilmCorrigan-1c0d1g7.pdf>
- [10] Pisters, P. (2012). *The neuro-image: A Deleuzian film-philosophy of digital screen culture*. Stanford University Press. https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Neuro_Image/A9A1kaZgcGgC?hl=en&gbpv=0
- [11] Massumi, B. (1992). *A user's guide to capitalism and schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*. MIT Press. https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Neuro_Image/A9A1kaZgcGgC?hl=en&gbpv=0
- [12] Flaxman, G. (2000). *The brain is the screen: Deleuze and the philosophy of cinema*. U of Minnesota Press. https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Brain_is_the_Screen/91saYRMXYQYC?hl=en&gbpv=0
- [13] Walsh, M. (2015). Patricia Pisters (2012) The neuro-image: A Deleuzian film-philosophy of digital screen culture. *Film-philosophy*, 19(1), 51-54. <https://doi.org/10.3366/film.2015.0032>
- [14] Colebrook, C. (2020). *Understanding Deleuze*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003118312>
- [15] Bogue, R. (2003). *Deleuze on cinema*. London: Routledge Press. <https://www.routledge.com/Deleuze-on-Cinema/Bogue/p/book/9780415966047>
- [16] Deleuze, G., Guattari, F., & Massumi, B. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia: Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari; translation and foreword by Brian Massumi*. University of Minnesota Press. <https://www.routledge.com/Deleuze-on-Cinema/Bogue/p/book/9780415966047>
- [17] Deleuze, G. (1998). *Essays critical and clinical*. Verso. <https://books.google.com/books?id=04KsxqTAGDYC>