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Three Visions of America

By Vincent Canby
New York Times News Service

NEW YORK — Two by two they ravage the landscape, drinking soda and chewing enough gum to stick a bull elephant to the sidewalks; they are children-on-the-run, aliens in their own land, by some odd coincidence the best American films to open in New York so far this year are about young couples who go beyond the law as easily and heedlessly as people embarking on summer vacations.

As if they were Hansel and Gretel wanting some day to find their way home, Kit and Holly, the outlaw-lovers in Terrence Malick's "Badlands," leave markers along the route they pursue in stolen cars across the South Dakota towards Montana. The markers are corpses, at least half a dozen, most of whom have been shot by Kit, at point-blank range.

Bowie and Keesche, the doomed pair in Robert Altman's meditation upon the Depression, "Thieves Like Us," don't kill anyone but because Bowie robs banks and tags along with men who do kill, they find themselves branded as desperadoes.

In Steven Spielberg's "The Sugarland Express," Clovis, who has only four more months to serve on a petty larceny sentence, walks out of a prison rehabilitation center at the urging of his nut-brained wife, Lou Jean. Together they kidnap a highway patrolman and force him to drive them 300 miles across Texas in an absolutely fruitless attempt to retrieve their child, Baby Langston, who has been taken away from them by the court.

Followed by 200 county and state police cars, by a mobile television unit, and cheered on by roadside fans, high school bands and drum majorettes, Clovis and Lou Jean ride joyously toward inevitable disaster.

"Badlands," "Thieves Like Us," and "The Sugarland Express" have a

number of superficial things in common, but they are essentially such different visions of American life I hope that the few things they share will not persuade you to think that if you've seen one, you've seen all three. You haven't.

The form, it's now apparent, is as elastic as the western that embraces everything from "Blazing Saddles" to "A Fistful of Dollars" and "My Darling Clementine."

The most interesting of the three films, as well as the toughest to sit through if you prefer movies to be cheerful and uplifting, is "Badlands," Malick's first directorial effort and a truly mesmerizing achievement.

The story was inspired by the short, bloody career of Charlie Starkweather, who at age 19, in January, 1958, with the seeming cooperation of his 14-year-old girlfriend, went on murder spree that claimed 10 victims, including three members of his girlfriend's family.

Although Malick very carefully sets his film in the 1950s, its impact comes as a projection of America today. Kit (Martin Sheen), a garbage man who fancies his resemblance to James Dean, and Holly (Sissy Spacek) take off on their joyride after Kit shoots Holly's father, who earlier had punished Holly for seeing Kit by killing her dog.

"Badlands" makes no attempt to analyze the mind of the mass murderer who, more than likely, is psychotic. Malick, instead, presents Kit and Holly as models of our time, children of the television age run amok, over-communicated, technically literate, but so completely desensitized they have very little connection with their own feelings and none whatsoever with those



Goldie Hawn



Martin Sheen

of others. Consequences to actions are beyond their comprehension.

The best Kit can do is to see himself as the star in a James Dean movie. Holly describes their flight from nowhere to nowhere as if she were living in the middle of a True Romance.

The performances by Sheen and Miss Spacek are superb, as clearly refined and precisely detailed as the flat Midwestern landscapes. They are designed, like the film itself, not to make mass murder comprehensible in a subjective way but to present us with the spectacle of what much of our life is like today. Not literally but spiritually, "Badlands" may well become an American classic.

Altman's "Thieves Like Us," based on Edward Anderson's '30s novel, is a less spectacular, more conventional film, but it too is a beautifully realized work. It is also one that makes me suspect that, without telling us, the director has embarked on a project to define in his films what might lately be called the American Experience.

"M*A*S*H," though I suppose about the Korean war, was an appalled though hugely funny reaction to the war in Vietnam, cast in the form of a gang-bang Hollywood war movie gone slightly but

importantly askew. In "McCabe and Mrs. Miller" Altman examined the American frontier and saw in it something quite different from the pretty myth we'd all like to believe in.

I'm not quite sure where "Brewster McCloud" fits into this project, but "Thieves Like Us" certainly does. It's Altman's Depression movie, immensely enriched with the help of hindsight and the soundtrack, with old radio programs like "Gangbusters." At the center of it is the love story of Bowie (Keith Carradine) and Keesche (Shelley Duvall).

Unlike the couple in "Badlands," they both are aware of the terrible consequences, prompting Bowie to make vague, unsuccessful resolutions to reform. One of Altman's most important contributions is the disciplined sentiment, most evident in the affecting self-conscious performance of Miss Duvall, land in the film's final sequence which is devastating.

Like "Badlands," "The Sugarland Express" is a first directorial effort, though Spielberg has made two highly regarded features for television, "Something Evil" and "Daddy's Girl," neither of which I've seen.

"The Sugarland Express" has neither the profound concerns of "Badlands" nor

the complexity of "Thieves Like Us," but it is an exceptionally well-made film that gives Goldie Hawn what might be the role of her career as the foolish, self-absorbed, petty thief who decides, too late, that she really wants to be a mother to Baby Langston.

The film is at its best in portraying the American public's insatiable appetite for sentimental nonsense, which knows no bounds. Have you heard the current radio commercial hawking a paperback biography of Lucille Ball, who is described as having "survived her husband's indiscretions and her own illegitimate baby" to become "one of Hollywood's richest women, and one of its loneliest?" When "The Sugarland Express" gives its attention to the dramatization of this sort of baloney, it is first-rate and very funny.

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