The Historical Thought of Film: Terrence Malick and Philosophical Cinema

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Steven M. Rybin

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This dissertation titled
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by

STEVEN M. RYBIN

has been approved for
the School of Interdisciplinary Arts
and the College of Fine Arts by

Vladimir L. Marchenkov
Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Arts

Charles A. McWeeny
Dean, College of Fine Arts
ABSTRACT

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Previous scholarly work on the director Terrence Malick has argued that his films – Badlands (1973), Days of Heaven (1978), The Thin Red Line (1998) and The New World (2005) – are, in varying ways, philosophical. This assessment is usually made via an analysis of the films in relation to a single philosophical metatext (frequently the work of Martin Heidegger) that transcends the concrete historical situation of both the given film and the historically existing viewer. This study seeks to intervene in this critical literature by theorizing an approach for understanding Malick’s films as works that do not merely illustrate already articulated philosophical themes but that rather function, in dialogue with the spectator, as an invitation to generate creative and historically situated meaning. The film medium, this study argues, is uniquely philosophical in that it exists in time (via the gradual entropy of the celluloid film print) as does the finite, historically embodied spectator. Malick’s cinema, I argue, reflects poetically upon the finite nature of both the film medium and the viewing subject through films that depict subjective experience in the historical past.

Rather than construct a theoretical methodology that will then be “applied” to the films, the study uses its first three chapters to construct a propadeutic (in philosophy, a preparatory framework) that in the remaining chapters inform an exploration of the philosophical thought that Malick’s four films encourage. The first chapter of this study
places the dissertation’s framework in critical debates about the use and function of philosophy in relation to film. The second and third chapters then illustrate in greater detail the project’s own approach. The second chapter uses the work of D.N. Rodowick, Gilles Deleuze, Stanley Cavell and others to suggest that in watching films we are led to reflect upon what we value as existential, becoming spectators. The third chapter builds upon the phenomenology of Vivian Sobchack in order to suggest how the temporality of film experience emerges through film space. In the final four chapters, I use the insights of the propadeutic to craft a philosophically informed critical analysis of Malick’s four films. This analysis demonstrates not only the philosophical value of the director’s oeuvre, but also functions as a case study demonstrating the larger value of philosophy and existential phenomenology to the critical study of Malick and film in general.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Vladimir L. Marchenkov
Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Arts
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This dissertation is dedicated to Jessica Belser, without whom not a word of it could have been written.
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INTRODUCTION

By reproducing the condition of dream and fantasy in commercialized form, film seems not only to absolve us of responsibility for the world, but also absolve us of responsibility for our dreams and fantasies or at least to drive them further inside us instead of awakening them.

-Michael Chanan

You hope that the picture will give the person looking at it a sense of things.

-Terrence Malick

Towards Film as Philosophy

This study will argue that the films of Terrence Malick – *Badlands* (1973), *Days of Heaven* (1978), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), and *The New World* (2005) – are philosophically significant, and that this significance involves an engagement with history and with the historical medium of film. This project is not the first to suggest that Malick’s work rewards attention that is in some way philosophical. Many such arguments justify their approach by noting Malick’s career, prior to the making of his first film, as a teacher of philosophy and a translator of Heidegger, and then proceed to analyze his work via reference to a particular philosopher (Heidegger is usually the single philosopher of choice in these studies, following the clues offered by the director’s otherwise scant biographical legend). This project intervenes in such arguments by exploring how Malick’s cinema might not just reflect the influence of a single philosopher but might also itself function as philosophy, or more broadly as a companion to thought. Malick’s poetics pressure us not to think only about or of the film medium, and not to exercise our analytical powers over or against it, but rather to think through and with it. To ascertain further what this idea, and the more general phrase “film as philosophy,” might signify – and to connect this signification to larger debates within cinema studies – this project will also seek a more rigorous approach endeavoring to understand how we make meaning,
and thus potentially philosophy, when engaged in the experience of cinema and with the experience of watching a Malick film in particular.

It is possible, at least initially, to consider the relationship between Malick and our ways of creating meaning by thinking of our engagement with Malick’s cinema as functioning like a dialogue occurring on and between two levels. Each of these speaks directly to the director’s engagement with the historical. First, we can consider the level of the historically and socially inscribed situations of the protagonists, whose stories are embedded, through Malick’s narratives and style, in lyrical filmic recreations of the American past. These characters include the fifteen-year-old Holly (Sissy Spacek) in *Badlands*, who becomes the unwitting accomplice to a series of murders across the American Midwest in the late 1950s, committed by her boyfriend Kit (Martin Sheen), in a story loosely based on the real crimes of Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate; the twelve-year-old Linda (Linda Manz) in *Days of Heaven*, who narrates a story, set in the Texas Panhandle of the late 1910s, about her brother Bill (Richard Gere), his lover Abby (Brooke Adams) and the man, who we come to know only as the Farmer (Sam Shepherd), they attempt to swindle; a group of soldiers in *The Thin Red Line* fighting in the Battle of Guadalcanal in World War II, a conflict they themselves only partially understand and which they have different means of coping with and questioning; and the quasi-mythical figures of Captain John Smith (Colin Farrell) and Pocahontas (Q’Orianka Kilcher), whose fabled relationship, a subject treated as something like a dream, occurs in and against the backdrop of the European colonization of America. As we will see, in all of these disparate stories Malick’s cinema insists upon a degree of empathetic
commitment to the fictional lives dramatized, a social commitment not mitigated—indeed, made more complex—when one also considers the measure of emotional distanciation present in the films through a form and style that are at least partially influenced by certain instances of American and European silent film and post-World War II European art cinema (this aesthetic influence is a more abstract level on which Malick and his critics engage with the past).

Second, we can connect these characters, their stories, and Malick’s narrative form and style to the level of our historical situations as film viewers, watching these narratives unfold through a material—the celluloid base of the projected filmstrip—that is itself becoming a part of the past, and that has always been inherently transient and fragile. This “death of cinema” is in fact an always impending “death,” we are now reminded, given the inherent transience of each and every film print. It is an especially salient transience at this moment in history, in which we find that the film medium is gradually transforming itself into other forms of the moving image. This “death of cinema” finds thematic and poetic parallel through the powerful specter of death within the structures of Malick’s historical narratives, stories which often foreshadow the fates of characters long before the characters themselves have met them. Through such narrative structures and the stylistic choices accompanying them, in other words, Malick is not only using an artistic medium but evoking, more forcefully than most filmmakers, a certain inescapable aspect of that medium’s inherent material composition, an aspect which has become increasingly salient in the era in which the films have been made. By thematically and poetically evoking evanescence, the stuff of the very material of cinema,
within narratives that insist on the mortality of characters whose historical situations at times seem to overwhelm them, Malick’s films remind us too of our own inescapably finite existence in history which mark our own reception of the films. In terms of their dramatic content (the lives of the characters which are dramatized), the form of that content (frequently granting the viewer knowledge of impending death prior to a character’s awareness), and the gradually eroding material base through which we experience that form and content, then, any philosophy which happens in and after an experience of a Malick film might thus be thought of as a meditation on the various ways we reflect upon the past, and the finiteness of any embodied situation in history.

Further, when we consider that celluloid film itself is disappearing as an artistic and cultural form, the victim of a gradual technological shift to digital media, this lends our present dialogue with Malick’s creative visions of the past, and his narrative structures that insist upon the mortality of the lives they fictionalize, a certain poignancy. This feeling is in part engendered by the context in which we are currently watching films and thinking and writing about them, for film’s disappearance is insisted upon in a technological landscape that never ceases, it seems, to promise its obsolescence (even as films, or hybrids of digital and celluloid, stubbornly persist in most exhibition contexts for the time being) and in academic work which has repeatedly, for nearly two decades, inscribed the “death of cinema” as a discursive trope justifying an exploration of so-called “new media.” At the same time it must also be acknowledged that “the death of cinema” does not merely signify a technological shift that has not quite fully arrived, and is more than a metaphor or a fashionable stance for film theory. Although no perfectly
permanent form of moving-image preservation exists, celluloid film is notoriously
difficult to preserve; every projection of a motion picture ensures at least a degree of
physical wear and tear on a film print which is quite simply not meant to last (even the
preservation of the original negative – itself subject to wear, tear, and the accidents of
history – ensures only the production of yet more prints which will, in turn, gradually
fade away). Indeed, the film strip itself is only temporarily (in the moment of projection)
animated with life; after the event of projection, it returns to being film in a can
containing not a moving film but rather only twenty-four photograms for every second of
the (now absent) duration. We are reminded by this condition how the photograph – and
in turn the photographic base of the celluloid film strip – functions as a specter of death,
most famously in Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida. The digital “preservation” of
celluloid on DVDs only serves to remind us that what is preserved on these discs is not
celluloid but rather a digital translation which does not preserve but rather digitally
compresses each celluloid second’s twenty-four photograms.

On both a discursive level and a very real phenomenological level, then, the ways
we reflect upon the past philosophically in watching and thinking about Malick’s work
might be thought of as happening through an aesthetic medium that is inherently
transient, having not only one toe in the past and its own gradual entropy but also
requiring this entropy as one of its primary enabling automatisms. The past in Malick is
thus not only “in” the drama; it not only describes the temporal distance between the act
of filmmaking and the event of film projection; and it is not only felt as a presence
through the influence past filmmakers, artists, and thinkers enact upon the poetic choices
Malick makes in his films. In other words, the past is not only communicated through the director’s “vision of the world,” as traditional auteurist parlance might put it. The past is, both literally and metaphorically, also inherently inscribed on the very material which enables those visions in the first place.

The idea that our encounters with film are encounters between the irrecoverably past world of the film and the historical world of our own viewing – call it a historical dialogue – has some consequence for the way we think through our experiences of movies, for even if the spectator is actively engaged with the images and sounds in the theater and aware of his or her own finite situation of viewing, not all films so readily acknowledge their own finite nature. Some, in fact, would seem to insist in their power to almost magically transcend a historically finite situation, and in this power appear to call upon the spectator to transcend the same. The “invisible style” of much Hollywood cinema – which, at least ideally, seeks to efface the salience of poetic choices in favor of using image and sound as the rationalized and standardized vehicles for an efficiently communicated narrative – has often been noted for the ideological power it would seem to have in effacing its own status as a material entity which is itself historically finite and limited in its power. Jean-Louis Baudry, in one of the most renown (and contested) theories of the film apparatus in the history of cinema studies, drew upon philosophy, in the form of the transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, in order to account for the ideological power of cinema – and the power this seems to generate in turn for the spectator – and through this power, its tendency to render viewers as centered, powerful
subjects in a position of transcendent mastery in relation to the world viewed on the screen:

[I]f the eye which moves is no longer fettered by a body, by the laws of matter and time, if there are no more assignable limits to its displacement – conditions fulfilled by the possibilities of shooting and of film – the world will be constituted not only by the eye but for it. The mobility of the camera seems to fulfill the most favorable conditions for the manifestation of the ‘transcendental subject.’ There is a phantasmatization of objective reality (images, sounds, colors) - but of an objective reality which, limiting its powers of constraint, seems equally to augment the possibilities of the power of the subject.7

Baudry’s piece has itself been criticized as an ahistorical argument about general effects of the film camera and its supposedly inherent tendency to put the viewing subject in a position of transcendent visual mastery matching that of the apparatus. His notions are perhaps most justifiable not in reference to any inherent property of the camera as a piece of technology but rather in reference to the historical – but remarkably consistent, heavily standardized, and thus transhistoricist – practice of most Hollywood cinema. David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger’s authoritative study of classical Hollywood cinema complicates Baudry’s sweeping claim about the ideology of cinematic technology. Bordwell (who pens the chapter in which the following quote appears) stresses that it is Hollywood practice – rather than the technology itself – which “emphasizes the camera as invisible witness, just as the soundtrack constitutes an ideal hearing of the scene,” pointing to a prevailing tendency for the image and sound, within
most narrative films produced in Hollywood, to act as an unobtrusive vehicle for the
delivery of narrative continuously stabilizing the inherent discontinuity manifest when
different visual perspectives of the world (different strips of film) are edited together.\textsuperscript{8}
The same study emphasizes the active participation of the viewer of Hollywood films in
constructing the fluid illusionist space of classical narrative, countering Baudry’s claim
that the film viewer is not consciously aware of either their own position of “mastery”
and the film’s illusions. Nonetheless, Bordwell grants that classical narrative produces a
kind of illusionism, albeit one created through the active complicity of the spectator. And
whatever their differences, both Baudry’s and Bordwell’s notions conceive the spectator
as a subject (a necessary presence for the illusionist power of film to occur in both
theories) that would seem to remain static across history.

According to such arguments, this general ideological aspect of standardized
cinema, at its most efficient and after it has been learned by the spectator through
repeated watching, functions to ultimately de-emphasize the viewer’s awareness that the
film is made of separate, different materials (the camera’s own filming and movement,
the strips of film spliced together, and the projector enabling the viewing of the film
constituted through these materials). This so-called “illusionism” of much Hollywood
film offers to the viewing subject the chance to partake of a mastery of a visual world (a
chance that, of course, the active spectator in Bordwell’s paradigm may just as likely
willfully resist), a world existing in a curiously transcendental realm, given the
consistency and prevalence of Hollywood narrative strategies over nearly the last ninety
years (given its dominance, we are thus justified in referring to historical Hollywood
practice as a transhistoricist). More significantly, in both Baudry’s and (implicitly) in Bordwell’s theories, this subject is then able to transcend history and an awareness of the historical materials of cinema (and the embodied and contingent situation of the viewer) that nonetheless enable this experience of plenitude. The viewed world on the screen in most Hollywood films, by “limiting its powers of constraint,” as Baudry would put it, disavows both its own historically finite existence and that of its spectators, calling on us to believe in visions which would seem to transcend their (and our) own time.

More recent theories of spectatorship, including studies of spectatorship practices that attempt to resist both standardized cinema’s and film theory’s frequently normative and ahistorical positioning of the spectator – have complicated the picture drawn by both Baudry and cognitive narratologists of classical narrative. Persuasive arguments, which we will return to in the third chapter, have suggested a greater degree of difference between the gaze of the camera and the gaze of the spectator. Such difference suggests that we do not always automatically identify with the classical cinema’s perceptual mastery of the world, going beyond, in its more radical contingency, even the active viewing postulated by Bordwell. But I suggest that even if spectators are actively aware of both the historical contingency of their own spectatorship and the transhistoricist nature of Hollywood filmmaking as a practice, not all films readily acknowledge the manner in which films are themselves a part of this historically situated dialogue between viewer and film. It is, then, not only the spectator who may resist ahistorical, cognitively normative or transcendent viewing positions, and assume responsibility for thinking
through films; films themselves can acknowledge their own perspectival embodiment within history.

On one level, the refusal to center a transcendent viewing subject through a realistic plenitude of an authentically recreated historical past is evident in a number of Malick’s own poetic choices, which are inflected, from *Days of Heaven* onwards, by a careful reworking of the syntax of silent Expressionism (particularly through his apparent admiration for the work of F.W. Murnau). Also important is the influence of post-World War II European modernism on all of his films. In other words, although Malick is ostensibly a Hollywood director, his stylistic strategies are not entirely distinguishable from the “art cinema” and reflect a more general sense of the availability of film history as a freely enabling ground from which to create a new poetics. In Malick, against much standardized Hollywood storytelling, the image is no longer only a vehicle for narrative and thus never acts purely in a standardized manner. As Robert Mottram has stated in an overview of Malick’s work, “In a period in the history of the visual arts in which the image is often sacrificed to a shallow conceptualism, he restores the beauty and power of the image as a carrier of meaning.”¹⁰ This project will argue that Malick’s images and sounds do not generate a world viewed and mastered by the rationalized mechanics of classical narrative form. If anything, Malick’s narratives and themes – particularly evident in the frustrations of his characters to attain the goals they set out to achieve, when these goals are even clear – attests to the impossibility of mastering our world. In that sense, in Malick the image is not just a vehicle for narrative. His films instead demand that we incessantly question the fictional world constructed through these images
and sounds, much the same way that Malick’s own characters (often through the stylistic
technique of the voice-over) sometimes question the fictional worlds in which they find
themselves housed. To that end, Mottram’s essay above nicely suggests that it is
impossible to regard Malick as a filmmaker who puts imagery and sound into a position
of only delivering narrative information; for Mottram as for myself, the power of
Malick’s imagery includes but ultimately exceeds this purpose.

However, it should be pointed out that Mottram, in the quote above, also
dangerously lifts Malick’s poetic choices above history – by placing him “above” the
“shallow conceptualism” the author sweepingly perceives in contemporary art – a move
that perversely puts Malick in the same category of the many films which attempt to
transcend and efface their own ineluctable embodiment in historical space and time. This
frequent sense that Malick is a filmmaker who operates outside of history – a point
argued elsewhere, for example, by Colin MacCabe, who in a review of The Thin Red Line
suggests that, despite the film’s status as a World War II drama, it is not interested in
history – is an idea this study’s argument as a whole resists.11 I seek instead to resituate
Malick – and any potential philosophy we might make in dialogue with his films – within
history.

It is possible to note, as I have above, how Malick’s own poetic choices, inflected
by a self-conscious understanding of the history of cinema and influenced by European
modernism, remind us of the film medium as a material signifier. In other words, at the
same time that Malick’s images are beautiful, it remains a beauty that is incessantly
questioned by both us and, in different ways and on different levels, the protagonists
within his films. But we might also note how this focus on the materiality and historical situation of a cinematic poetics intersects with a much larger focus on the materiality of cinema which has existed within the same contemporary film culture in which Malick has made his films. The classical cinema’s ideological effects were nurtured during a period when cinema’s salient position as perhaps the chief art form – or at least the chief mass medium – seemed fairly secure. Outside of cinematheques and museums, no one paid much attention to the gradual entropy of the single film print (and this was true even of the first few decades of cinema studies) because cinema appeared to be a fairly permanent cultural institution. Given the challenge to film, first by television, and more recently digital forms of the moving image, in contemporary film culture we are no longer convinced of this permanence, and it has generated a necessary attention to the transience of the medium.

As Laura U. Marks has suggested in her recent work on phenomenological film criticism, our contemporary sense that the medium of celluloid film is fading into the past prompts our awareness that in watching films it is often not the “plenitude” of film’s transcendental realism that we identity with, but rather it is the dispersion and loss of the film medium itself that affects cinephiles more poignantly. In suggesting this she poses an implicit challenge to any theorist who might conceive the spectator as a masterful, stable subject, in either transcendental or cognitive-narratological terms, a challenge that echoes Malick’s own refusal in his filmmaking to identify the film image as a vehicle for visual mastery:
How does one identify with dying images? Recall that cinematic identification was first defined by Christian Metz as identification with a character (secondary), or with the look of the apparatus itself (primary); more recently, secondary identification came to be redefined as an oscillation among many subject positions. Secondary identification remains understood as identification with a person, or a personified being. In contrast, I suggest that secondary identification may be with an inanimate thing or things; and that primary identification itself may be an identification with dispersion, with loss of unified selfhood.¹²

In her study Marks does not simply advocate a postmodernism wherein subjectivity is inherently always de-stabilized or in flux. She asserts that we bring to experiences of cinema our own subjectivities, perceptions, and thinking, but that in doing so we no longer encounter an object that our subjectivity can confidently master. Instead, she argues that the melancholia felt within a film culture witnessing the decay of celluloid images – frequently a first-hand witnessing, in the form of scratches and deterioration that have always existed in even fairly new film prints – is the result of an identification that no longer believes in the transcendence of history invited by the plenitude of standardized cinema. What we identify with, on some level, is the metaphorically “mortal” status of cinema itself – that its perceptions and expressions are, like us, historically situated and finite, and indeed because of this, also far different from ours, embodied in the same world but from the contingent perspective of a finite situation that is irreducibly its own. Hollywood storytelling practices may by and large continue to insist upon their visual mastery of the world viewed, and, indeed, this mastery may
migrate unencumbered into other forms of moving-image media. But for this study it is no longer tenable to situate our encounters with projected celluloid – and, in particular, our encounters with celluloid films such as Malick’s that acknowledge their own historical situation – as an encounter with visions that give us transcendental mastery over the world, and thus a confirmation of our unified selves. The historical art of film instead challenges our selves to expand and become through a rather more difficult dialogue; Malick’s films pose this challenge and thus they are, within the recent history of contemporary American cinema, privileged philosophical companions. Our encounters with these films are thus encounters with historically and finitely situated “others,” encounters in which we make meaning not by subjugating the “power” of cinema to distanced analysis but rather in a more complex dialogical fashion that acknowledges the difference of film’s perception relative to our own.

This dialogue is at its richest, then, when the films themselves bring an awareness of their own finite, historical situations – that is, when they themselves appear to realize that promises of visual mastery now ring hollow. Malick’s films, against the arguments of some of his critics, give us not perceptions of a world transcending history but rather perceptions of (recreated) historical worlds existing within the materiality of history. As the chapter on Badlands will show further, this idea of a dialogical cinema is in large part related to the production of Malick’s first film against the contested backdrop of the Vietnam War in America, in which authority became not a site of accepted meaning but a force open to question, interrogation, and critique. Dana Polan suggests this idea of debate, initiated in Badlands, is in fact central to all of Malick’s work, including The Thin
Red Line which is for Polan “very strongly a writerly film, a film of voice and narration and inscription, a film whose processes of construction are rendered manifest,” a writerly mode of making cinema directly influenced by the European modernism which preceded the making of Badlands by about fifteen years.\(^\text{13}\)

To that end, reflecting upon Malick’s work philosophically is in a certain way a reflection upon what has come before: the past of American and European cinema which form the enabling traditions of Malick’s own creativity; the past histories Malick dramatizes, and the various ways the characters inscribed in those histories attempt to negotiate the larger personal, social, and historical meaning of their lives; the transience of the celluloid material on which his visions are inscribed; and the past histories of the concepts we use to make meaning of our experiences of that material. For the purposes of this introduction, this last point is worth reflecting upon further, because it allows us to begin our consideration of how our encounters with Malick’s cinema might be philosophical. Because Malick’s visions are historically situated and finite, these films do not function as monological philosophical treatises, nor do they reward a philosophical reading which might locate their meaning in relation to a single philosophical metatext (say, via exclusive reference to the work of Heidegger) wholly transcending the particularity of the films. As I understand it, philosophical attention towards Malick’s historical visions, or, it is better to say, in dialogue with them, should signal an interest not in talking about cinema from a point of view already wholly available within the disciplines of film studies or philosophical aesthetics (the primary field of philosophy this study engages); as I have already argued, the influence of both expressionism and
modernism on Malick’s work and the decay of the film medium guarantee that such mastery will no longer be rewarded. Rather, I want to think through how contemporary film studies might draw from philosophical concepts in order to answer the questions Malick’s imagery, sound, and narrative structures pose to us. This larger inquiry – signaled in the approach and the thesis developed in this introduction and the first two chapters – will ultimately be oriented, in this project’s final four chapters, towards a fine-grained philosophical dialogue with Malick’s work. In the next section I would like to suggest some of the questions Malick poses to us, and why they are worth answering.

**On Three Motifs and Their Questions**

In this section I would like to briefly present three motifs, each generating patterns in both theme and style, and each signaling a crisis in knowledge dramatized but not fully resolved in their fictional worlds. Through these motifs, in other words, the films pose questions to us. The first of these motifs is the use of the voice (which becomes an especially salient motif through Malick’s signature technique of the voice-over). Occasionally the voice-over will imply questions to us through ambiguities produced through lacuna in narration; at other times the voice-overs will explicitly pose questions the characters ask of the fictional worlds in which they find themselves housed. The second motif is the broken relationship between humanity and nature. The third motif is the journey, which reflects, on a much more abstract level, the recurring tension in Malick’s films between preservation (of a past a character departs but still, in some sense, holds on to) and becoming (the uncertain future towards which the character is moving).
Each of these motifs begin as concerns in the narratives and in terms of style, but they ultimately also speak to our own experiences of the past worlds which Malick recreates for us, and the meaning we might make of those worlds in attempting to puzzle out answers to the questions and ambiguities they pose.

We can begin with the voice. We often hear the voice in a conventional sense in Malick, as dialogue between characters. But the most suggestive voices are heard in voice-over, in the voices that guide us through the worlds envisioned by Malick’s films. These voice-overs are initial signs that Malick’s cinema speaks dialogically with us, rather than monologically, for by virtue of their naiveté or their poetic suggestiveness (or their mix of both), they call for an open response which parallels the characters’ open-ended searches for meaning, rather than demand agreement with already articulated truths. Sometimes, in the early films – *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* – they take the form of what seems, at least initially, a more conventional narration, delivered through the voice of one character at an unknown moment in the future after the narrative has ended. In the later films – *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* – the focus on a single diegetic narrator is abandoned in favor of a more impressionistic, shifting prism of voice-overs (only loosely tethered to the subjectivities of particular characters) functioning less to clearly narrate a story and more to pose poetic questions to and about the world envisioned by the films. Unlike the first two films, these later voices do not tend to speak from a moment in the future after the events in the film are over; instead they actively inquire into the present, even as the present slips into the past. In either case, the viewer is
only guided into the worlds of the films by the voice; the voices never answer, and rarely presume to be able to answer, all of the questions they generate.

For example, the voice of the fifteen-year-old girl Holly (played by a twenty-four year old Spacek) in Malick’s first feature, *Badlands*, welcomes us into her universe in the very first shot of the film. Later in the story Holly and her older boyfriend, Kit, will be responsible for a series of murders across the American Midwest. The film begins, however, with a shot that suggests innocence more than criminality. This shot is of Holly, sitting on her bed, petting her dog, but Holly’s voice-over is from some unknown future time after the narrative we are about to see has been completed (although judging by the quality of the voice in this and in other scenes the Holly we hear is not that much older than the young Holly we see). Holly’s first voice-over in this opening shot tells us of certain private details of her life, details regarding the death of her mother (of pneumonia), her father’s emotional distance after (and likely, we are made to infer, before) that death, and their subsequent move from Texas to South Dakota. But the accrual of these details – details which at first seem so private, and the intimate privilege of the spectator to hear – serves ultimately to guarantee only a puzzling relationship to this character for the spectator. It does not amount to a full picture, because our knowledge of these major events in Holly’s history come part and parcel with her inclusion of even more specific details that prompt more questions than they answer.

The voice-over is justifiably considered the initial point of entry into a critical understanding of any of his films, but the world it guides us into is patterned also by an equally important second motif in Malick’s cinema, the motif of the broken relationship
between character and landscape. In *Days of Heaven*, Bill and Abby perform their labor against a landscape that, as both Malick’s supporters and detractors have attested, comprises some of the most beautiful imagery in the history of cinema. But apart from a few stolen moments (as in the case of an early morning rendezvous, when the Farmer is still asleep, in which Bill and Abby sip his champagne from his glasses while standing in a stream) and other fleeting suggestions that this imagery might represent possible realities other than those which have been realized in the social world of the diegesis, these characters are themselves alienated from these beautiful landscapes in which (and against which) they work, just as the soldiers in Malick’s third film, *The Thin Red Line*, seem apart from the beauty of the Guadalcanal (a beauty Malick’s and cinematographer John Toll’s camera nonetheless remains sensitive to) against whose backdrop they fight with the Japanese. *The New World*, on the other hand, depicts moments in the American past in which this alienation might not have yet existed, and thus in relation to Malick’s earlier films the break between humans and nature functions in part as an elegy. The break between the human being and the natural landscape suggests that the beauty in Malick’s films, although an undeniable site of cinematographic pleasure for the spectator, has a more disturbing underside too, in that it is a beauty that the characters themselves are not fully able to experience. This fact eventually impacts, I think, our own reception of the films. My study will also suggest that this break between the human and the natural often initiates a desire for transcendence in the characters that functions in particular ways in each of the historical contexts Malick dramatizes, most tellingly in *The Thin Red Line* through the character of Witt (Jim Cavaziel).
The voices pose implicit and explicit questions; the divisions between character and landscape point to the difficulty of making meaning in a world inimical to the individual. And the motif of the journey – stated more abstractly as a tension between preservation and what I will for now call an “uncertain becoming” – creates a third crucial pattern of theme and style that engenders further hermeneutical ambiguities. Like the other motifs it also speaks to the knowledge possible within the diegesis and within our own experiences of the films. In Malick everywhere the viewer is given the sense of a past existence or an imagined past that characters – thrown ineluctably into journeys toward unknown futures – are determined to hold onto. Both Holly and her eventual lover, Kit, are infatuated with popular culture in different ways in *Badlands*, but it is Kit’s obsession that is most telling in this regard. Kit adopts the mannerisms of James Dean as he heads out with Holly on his crime-ridden journey across the American Midwest, but in the late 1950s America of *Badlands*, itself an imagined historical world which nonetheless possesses some degree of veracity, Dean was already dead and Kit’s (not altogether convincing) preservation of the deceased star’s persona gestures towards no new meaning and, as another commentator has noted, a total lack of any new substantial identity. This lack of meaning is evoked by the pathetic miniature stone statue Kit erects in the dirt immediately before he is arrested by the police at the end of the narrative, a mute symbol which is the only way Kit can think to memorialize what he has seen and experienced in the badlands of the Midwest. Preservation is important within the worlds of *Days of Heaven*, as the Farmer desires the cultivation of his land so that future cultivation and a resulting financial security will be made possible, but this comes at the
expense of the future of laborers. Within the world of *The Thin Red Line*, meanwhile, soldiers attempt to preserve their lives in the face of constant violent reminders of their own mortality. Most saliently, though, the tension between preservation and becoming is located in the journey of *The New World*, as the European colonizers seek the founding of Jamestown as both the continuance of European ideas and modes of living and as the beginning of a nonetheless uncertain future in America.

This tension between the preservation of the past and the journey towards an unknown future, operating at the level of theme and story, is also echoed in a certain tension between tendencies in the stylistic patterns of Malick’s films. Malick’s work does not function within the classical mode of the Hollywood historical epic, in which the visual plenitude that results from classicism’s “invisible style” guarantees a “realistic” depiction of the past into which the viewer may become sutured. Instead, these films approach representations of history via multiple stylistic strategies that through their very multiplicity call attention to themselves. These strategies intermittently emphasize, on the one hand, realism, historical authenticity, visual depth, and duration (and thus a Bazinian inclination towards preservation of the integrity and authenticity of a past image) and, on the other hand, frequently disorienting editing patterns, particularly in *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* (and thus at the same time an Eisensteinian gesture towards the future, in the form of new ideas which may arise through the abstractions of the edit). Are we to take Malick’s images as confidently historiographic creations which suggest meaning is locatable in reference to a knowable past (in the films’ tendency towards realism and authenticity in their depiction of historical subjects, even if that authenticity
is sometimes achieved through quite artificial means) or as more speculative abstractions demanding from us concepts with which we may approach the future (in the films’ contrapuntal tendency towards editing patterns that explicitly call for the abstractions of interpretation, and in their fictionalization of recognizably historical worlds)? As we will see, Malick’s cinema tends to suggest that the dichotomy sometimes established between historiography and philosophical speculation is unfounded.

The voice, the broken relationships between character and landscape, and the journey’s tension between preservation of the past and an uncertain becoming are thus implicated in the larger thesis of this project: that the films of Terrence Malick, in dialogue with their viewers, have the potential to make an original contribution to what we know (or, in film studies, perhaps do not yet know) as philosophy. Again, these are films that emerge from the conventions of American filmmaking, certain silent films which attract Malick, and the European traditions of modernist cinema which inflected the director’s style in the early 1970s (an inflection which remains to some extent in the two recent films). But the films are not fully explained by these conventions and influences; just as they depart from those conventions at a certain point in their making, they demand, at a certain point in the analysis, a different order of response. Like the questions characters sometimes pose on the soundtracks to the films in voice-over, or in the implicit questions which arise in attempting to reconcile the division between the human and the natural, and like the questions engendered in the films’ ambiguous stance (reflected in the narrative but also in formal and stylistic tensions) vis-à-vis preservation of the past and a future becoming, Malick’s work, far from transcending the historical
worlds it depicts, engages us in a historical dialogue. This is a dialogue that might be productively connected to discourses in film studies and philosophy which themselves question relationships between the disciplines. Indeed, it is in the questions engendered by the third of these motifs – the tension between the past and the future in the journeys the characters embark upon – that most productively brushes up against a similar tension we currently feel in cinema studies between a historiographic preservation of the past (which reflects a confidence in the stability of the film object even as it appears to disappear and even as its disappearance challenges our conception of the viewing subject) and a perhaps more speculative orientation towards the future, in which we reflect upon what this medium of film might still yet become, even as its traditional material basis slips into history.

Malick’s Philosophical Cinema

By questioning rather than telling, Malick’s cinema asserts its dialogical rather than monological nature. This has inevitable consequences for the ways we might use philosophical concepts to understand his films. “Philosophy” as I use it in this study is not meant to refer only or even primarily to the construction of transcendental systems of understanding which subsume all historical particularity. Malick’s cinema does not ultimately show faith in the construction of such systems. The visions of the world in these films, despite their undeniable beauty and their frequent lyricism which sometimes provokes feelings of “transcendence,” does not ultimately transcend history; rather than positing transcendence as an escape hatch from the historical and social, these films are
in great part interested in exploring how the desire for transcendence functions within particular social and historical contexts. In what follows I rather speak of philosophical meaning-making in a dialogue with cinema as profoundly historical and contingent. In viewing these films we not only “make meaning,” although this is not a bad phrase to use to describe what critics and scholars of the cinema do.\textsuperscript{16} In a deeper sense, these films and their viewers have the potential to make historical meaning, that is, to do what we might call historical philosophy: philosophy within and in response to particular moments in history and society, and thus a philosophy which speaks to and of those histories, which arises from an aesthetic experience and which speaks to and from the bodies and minds of the human beings occupying a given historical moment. Like the meaning that Malick’s characters often seek (but rarely find), such meaning always emerges from or is motivated in some sense by the past, although it nonetheless extends towards an open future.

The nature of this philosophical dialogue emerges in part, as the study will show, from a relationship between the given aesthetic possibilities of the fragile and quickly disappearing medium of film and the given conceptual possibilities of film theory and criticism, possibilities which in both cases we might be able to understand more substantially via recourse to philosophical concepts. The aesthetic possibilities of cinema at any given moment in film history comprise what the historian and theoretician David Bordwell has called the “historical poetics” of the medium, possibilities which enable the creation of – but are also sometimes renewed and extended in – Malick’s films.\textsuperscript{17} Any film, as the second chapter will explore in greater detail, may inflect or rethink a
historically given poetics, or even deploy techniques conventionally and rather straightforwardly (to an extent that a poetics might begin to look like little more than a cluster of clichés), or perhaps even reject them outright in favor of a new approach, but in all of these ways films always engage with a given set of possibilities at least initially as creatively enabling historical limits. And as viewers and critics of the cinema we also have creatively enabling limits. As film scholars we encounter the films we see with our own kinds of possibilities, inherent in the history of film historiography, criticism, theory, and potentially, as this study will suggest, philosophy. These possibilities form, as we will see, a corresponding “critical poetics” of the cinema meeting the work of the filmmaker in a historically situated dialogue, and that may be extended, recreated, rethought, or created anew under the pressures of an experience of especially affecting, innovative, or challenging films, to which old concepts may not be wholly adequate. Indeed, the disappearance of the film medium implicitly reflected upon in Malick’s poetic engagement with the past pressures us to orient our concepts towards an understanding of that disappearance. But at the same time such an orientation must also be directed towards the future, through an awareness of how Malick’s work is implicated in a process of becoming as the medium in which he works undergoes constant change. To say this is to say no more (but also no less) than that Malick’s films and our conceptual considerations of them exist in, and are enabled by, various histories, while at the same time gesturing towards possible futures.

In Malick’s work these registers of the past are often inscribed in creative and formally innovative ways, even at the same time as his narrative strategies emerge from a
thorough understanding of the tradition of cinema. This notion suggests that even though Malick’s films ultimately break from the genre conventions which at least partially enable them, his work might nonetheless be productively situated in the history of the Hollywood historical film. Because these films break, at a certain point, from genre conventions, they might be placed more specifically in that subgenre of historical films which Robert Burgoyne argues achieves a level of “historical thinking” through innovative formal strategies that implicitly question the conventions of standardized visions of the historical (as in, for example, the traditional historical costume epic) in cinema.18 This “historical thinking” in Malick on one level attempts to poetically defamiliarize the past and as a result speaks to how our engagement with the past intersects with our understanding the present. In all of these ways, Malick’s films engage us with various registers of the past; to put it another way, his four films, through the way they pose questions to us, creatively participate in the production of historically situated knowledge.

Although this study seeks to more rigorously explore how Malick’s films participate in this creation of knowledge, the fundamental intuition that Malick’s cinema is philosophically significant – and that in contact with it we may learn something about all of these different registers of “the past” – is not, in one sense, a new one. Only recently, however, have steps been made towards considering philosophy in relation to the inherently dialogical nature of Malick’s work. As noted earlier, several scholars have explored potential links between Malick’s films and philosophical traditions. In his now classical work of film theory, The World Viewed, Stanley Cavell cited Days of Heaven as
a particularly important film in his understanding of the ontology of film, but also made it clear that in articulating his sense of the film’s philosophical resonance he did “not wish to hide the knowledge that years ago Malick translated Heidegger’s *The Essence of Reasons,*” and if I also point out, as others have, that Malick taught philosophy at MIT after having been taught philosophy at Harvard by Cavell himself we only provide our intuition that Malick’s work is philosophically significant with even firmer biographical ground. And although I draw freely from both Cavell and Heidegger later in the study (in ways that I hope will be expansive rather than reductive), reference to the work of these important thinkers who emerge from Malick’s biography within an otherwise fairly straightforward textual analysis of Malick’s work will not prove the philosophical significance of the four films. As Robert Sinnerbrink has suggested in his own essay on *The Thin Red Line,* “the relationship between Heidegger and Malick should remain a question, rather than a presupposition, for philosophical readings of his work.” As Sinnerbrink himself points out, Simon Critchley’s earlier philosophically inclined essay on the same film argues a similar point, suggesting that to “read from cinematic language to some philosophical metalanguage is both to miss what is specific to the medium of film and usually to engage in some sort of cod-philosophy deliberately designed to intimidate the uninitiated.”

I echo this warning, particularly because, as we have seen, Critchley’s focus on questioning the relationship between films and certain philosophical texts echoes the dialogical questioning evident in Malick’s films. It is also particularly important to cite it when discussing Malick’s films because of the manner in which they dramatically and
empathetically depict the situations of characters who may be philosophically “uninitiated” but who nonetheless search for a meaning and significance not presently available in the social situations in which they find themselves inscribed. However, other questions emerging from this debate within work on Malick remain. What approach to a critical analysis of his work is flexible enough to keep the insights of past Malick critics in view – critics who have perhaps too quickly ascribed the meaning of his work via reference to one philosophical metatext or another, and yet who have also clearly generated insights worth holding onto despite flaws in or lack of clearly articulated approach? And what approach is also advanced enough to deepen the notion that Malick’s cinema, and cinema more generally, can function as a philosophical companion, a dialogical partner, an aid in the creation of imaginative concepts? My thesis that Malick’s work engages in an historical dialogue with cinema viewers – a dialogue that reflects upon the past through an aesthetic medium quickly becoming a part of that past – suggests that his work cannot be reduced as the monological echo of an already articulated philosophical system. His films call for us to deeply rethink and perhaps even create new concepts, not simply to only reassert old ones, and their thematic interest in the fate of the human mind and body in particular historical and social situations speaks to our own historical situation as we watch his films. What having an historical dialogue with cinema means – and what it might mean to how we understand Malick’s films, the past of this medium, and how we handle both film criticism and film theory in the future of this discipline as its central object of study becomes more and more a historical object – will be made more immediately concrete in Chapter One, via reference to both
disciplinary and interdisciplinary debates within film studies (and the much smaller subfield of Malick studies) and philosophy.

**Chapter Breakdown**

Chapter One will cover methods exploring the relationship between film and philosophy in order to advance an argument which seeks to situate our historical viewings and dialogues with Malick’s cinema as philosophical. The chapter will review major approaches which have emerged in the recent history of the film-philosophy debate and through this discussion I will begin to place my own discussion of Malick’s cinema within these discourses, seeking to illustrate how the films themselves in various ways complicate these paradigms. My interest, then, is not to craft a methodology which may or may not be appropriate for the films, but rather to let the films themselves, in large part, suggest the approach through which we might dialogue philosophically with them. The possible approaches I will explore in the first chapter include categories that I will refer to as the “sociological,” in which the meaning we make of cinema refers to the social frameworks through which we view films; the “ontological,” in which philosophers have paid attention to cinema in their attempts to locate its timeless essence; and the “illustrative” approach, which uses film as an illustration of philosophical issues already articulated elsewhere in the history of philosophy. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of recent arguments that attempt to encompass and at the same time move beyond these earlier approaches by suggesting that film can function, on some level, *as* philosophy, an approach which argues that our phenomenological experiences of films
are a site in which the making of meaning, and potentially philosophy, can occur. This discussion will pave the way for the construction of my own approach, developed in the two subsequent chapters.

Chapters Two and Three will build upon the “film as philosophy” approach and the various ways it complicates the sociological, ontological, and illustrative paradigms, by exploring further its suggestion that both the post-filmic act of writing about films and the phenomenological experience of the films themselves offer sites for the creation of dialogical and historical knowledge. The purpose of these chapters is thus not to build a methodology which will determine everything that is to be said about the films, but rather, in the sense that Wittgenstein proposes, to craft a propaedeutic which will prepare us for a philosophical and dialogical engagement with Malick’s historical visions of the world. The second and third chapters, concerned as they are with the philosophical dimensions of film experience and its relationship to Malick’s historical cinema, seeks to deepen the “film as philosophy” approach via recourse to a reflection on the twin concepts of historical time and historical space, and how these inform the meaning we produce in dialogue with cinema. Chapter Two will focus on the notion of historical time, positing my own contribution to the “film as philosophy” debate by suggesting that the philosophy we make after an experience of film is in large part the result of the “hermeneutical pressures” which the film places on us. I construct an approach to Malick’s work through an exploration of the thought of Gilles Deleuze, Stanley Cavell, D.N. Rodowick, and others to advance the idea that philosophy has the potential to happen in a dialogic manner when engaged in the post-viewing experience of thinking.
and writing about cinema. The chapter will then suggest how Cavell’s idea of the “automatism” (as it re-emerges in debates in cinema studies in Rodowick’s recent book *The Virtual Life of Film*) – which I will for now define, within the practice of filmmaking, as an “aesthetic possibility” – can function as a means to a deeper understanding of both the historical practice of particular filmmakers and the critical poetics we as viewers and scholars use to meet those films in the post-filmic act of writing and interpretation. The notion of “automatism,” as the chapter will discuss, allows us to define the film medium as one which is tethered to a certain tradition and historical situation, and yet is nonetheless implicated in an ongoing, open-ended sense of becoming, even as – indeed, because – certain of its materials recede into history and mutate or shift into other forms of the moving image.

Chapter Three will deepen our understanding of this dialogue by complementing the first chapter’s focus on the temporal with a focus on the phenomenology of film experience in historical space in work by Vivian Sobchack on the phenomenology of film experience. Sobchack’s work, I suggest, tells us that our experience of the worlds created by film’s available automatisms is never only an experience of an object, but rather a complex dialogue with something very much like a *subject*: the subjective perception of the film in relation to its world. This subjective perception, while enabled by the filmmaker’s “fleshing out” of historically given automatisms (or in the filmmaker’s creation of new ones), in many ways takes on a life of its own in the filmgoer’s share of the space of film experience, freeing itself from any intentions that the auteur may have had in a dialogue with a spectator which has the potential to significantly inflect and
revitalize the critical poetics brought to that space. While filmgoing contexts have changed in some ways since the publication of Sobchack’s book (in many ways cinema has become *virtual*, as Rodowick has suggested, able to be realized conceptually in forms that are digital and portable rather than analogical and projected), her work nonetheless gives us solid ground from which to consider the complex relationship between the historical body of the filmgoer and the historical “body” of an aesthetic vision in film, each of which approach the world and the film’s vision of it from a particular point in space. After exploring Sobchack’s notion of the film’s subjectivity, the balance of Chapter Three will reflect further upon the transient nature of the film medium in a return to the first chapter’s concern with the post-filmic act of writing about cinema, deepening my conception of what it means to practice film criticism philosophically – that is, what it means to wield the possibilities of a critical poetics in writing about the impermanent medium of film in a meaningful way – by exploring the relevance of Mikhail Bakhtin’s early concepts of “answerability,” “outsideness,” and “unfinalizability.” These phenomenological concepts give the critic useful tools to demonstrate the relationship of a film’s historical vision to social and ethical contexts. Bakhtin’s ideas productively align not only with Sobchack’s work on the phenomenology of film experience but also with the open-ended questions which Malick’s work itself poses to us and the complex empathetic engagement with characters that his narrative form and style generate.

Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven of this study are concerned with a detailed, film-by-film philosophical dialogue with Terrence Malick’s work, an analysis informed by this introduction and the three preparatory chapters. This analysis involves complex
theory, historiography, and criticism, to be sure; but it also involves looking carefully at and listening closely to the work of a no less complex oeuvre by a filmmaker whose importance is now becoming more and more extensively recognized. But just as much as this study seeks to avoid a determining theoretical framework, my dialogue with Malick’s work does not seek as its purpose the valorization of a single individual (such an approach would itself determine too much). The name “Terrence Malick” as I use it in this study largely refers to a historical personage that we will know no better at the end of this project than we do now. Part of this is the auteur’s fault: Malick has remained famously reclusive, reluctant to give interviews and make pronouncements on the meaning of his work. His “biographical legend,” that trail of extrafilmic commentary that constitutes our historiographic understanding of any filmmaker as a biographical personage, is thus in Malick’s case marked only by an extraordinary paucity beyond what we know of his early career as a philosopher and certain insights he has shared in very occasional interviews. One of this study’s enabling grounds (one of its automatisms), then, may be auteurism, but its ultimate interest is not in authorship itself but rather in the experience of cinema – and the meanings that experience might entail – which the work of one director offers. Words Dudley Andrew has written echo my intention here: “The auteur marks the presence of temporality and creativity in the text, including the creativity of emergent thought contributed by the spectator [my italics].”

Thus our experience of this open-ended temporality and creativity – and the meaning we make within it – has little to do, ultimately, with biography or intentionality. Auteurism, like standardized cinema, can act as a barrier just as much as an instigator to
thought; as Dana Polan has pointed out in writing of *The Thin Red Line*, “it is important to note that for many moviegoers, [the film] will be viewed as the film of an auteur, its images of nature not naturally and spontaneously arising before us but seen to be enounced for us by a strong creative voice[.]”24 This study, in contrast, takes Malick – and his undeniably “strong creative voice” – to be only one node in the complex experience of cinema that constitutes his body of work, and the power of the images in his films to move us to thinking is not directly tethered to any biographical intentionality. His films, far from being ultimately reconcilable to the enouncing of only a single voice, have much to do with the larger historical situation of the film medium, reflections upon the American pasts in his films and the American histories enabling the production of those films, and the various ways in which we might make meaning when engaged with cinema. These are concerns that the body of work signed by Terrence Malick engage with in ways that are very rich and unpredictable. “Film aesthetics,” as I also hope to have made clear by now, is not meant to refer to a bloodless formalism. The aesthetic, as embodied within the transient medium of film, is always, in a sense, fading into history, and in this it parallels and speaks to the potential futures of the bodies and minds on its screen and sitting in its theaters. As I hope to show, aesthetics is thus deeply involved in the meaning we make and the philosophies we live by, as are Malick’s films deeply and poetically involved with the lives of the characters, the worlds in which they live, and the medium on which these are inscribed. Malick’s engagement with history suggests that we cannot escape the past, but the very impermanence of his fictional world impels us to recognize that the very real social world these films refer to is perhaps more malleable
than we may have first realized. It is with these questions in mind that a dialogue with Malick’s cinema can begin.

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4 It needs to be stated from the outset that I do not intend this dichotomy between film and digital cinema to result in a dichotomy between the impermanent and the permanent. Digital cinema, like film celluloid and all other forms of moving image preservation, is an impermanent form with its own kinds of material entropy. Media preservation is essentially migratory; only by migrating to different media at different moments in history can moving images be preserved. However, at this moment in history, the impermanence of digital forms of cinema – often referred to under the umbrella phrase “New Media” – are not salient in our minds; if the phrase “death of cinema” holds a weight within discourse on cinema studies, the phrase “the death of new media” certainly does not.


6 An extended technical discussion of how the twenty-four-frames-per-second analog technology of film celluloid is transferred to DVD is available from multiple sources; one of the most thorough is found in Jim Taylor, DVD Demystified (Third Edition) (New York: McGraw-Hill/TAB Electronics, 2006).


9 For an example of one such argument which complicates Baudry, see Richard Allen, Projecting Illusion: Film Spectatorship and the Impression of Reality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 22. Vivian Sobchack’s own theory of film phenomenology, which will be explored extensively in the second chapter, also complicates Baudry’s theory. It should also be noted that much of Janet Staiger’s work after the publication of The Classical Hollywood Cinema focused squarely on the contingency of various practices of media reception which her work with Bordwell and Thompson tended to efface. See, for example, Staiger, Media Reception Studies (New York: NYU Press, 2005).


14 If Insdorf can read the beauty of Malick’s imagery as a distraction, other critics have pegged it as a virtue. Gilberto Perez, in a canonical reading of *Days of Heaven*, suggests that its beauty never devolves into “a static pictorialism. Nor does it use its beauty seductively,” and Perez goes on to point out how Malick uses imagery to manipulate mood in a manner that has both historical and philosophical significance. See Gilberto Perez, “Film Chronicle: *Days of Heaven*,” in *The Hudson Review* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1979). We will return to Perez’s thoughts in the fifth chapter of this study.

15 Hannah Patterson has suggested that the only identity Kit ever becomes comfortable with is his identity as a criminal at the end of the film, precisely because it allows him to become a celebrated cultural figure like Dean. See Patterson, “Two Characters in Search of a Direction: Motivation and the Construction of Identity in *Badlands*,” in *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America (Second Edition)*, ed. Hannah Patterson (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 38.

16 Indeed, it evokes the title of the most important work within Film Studies on hermeneutics: David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of the Cinema* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989).

17 Bordwell’s vision for a historical poetics is laid out across several works: in the last chapter of *Making Meaning*, 249-274; *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); and in the introduction to *Post Theory*, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 3-36.


22 The only two extant interviews with Terrence Malick have recently been republished in Lloyd Michaels, *Terrence Malick* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009).


CHAPTER ONE: PHILOSOPHY IN FILM STUDIES

The notion of “film as philosophy” has rarely paved the way within analyses of Malick’s films to a clearly articulated approach that might prepare the ground for creative and philosophically productive engagements with his work. As we will see later in this chapter, too often the notion of “film as philosophy” is stated rather vaguely as a justification for what turns out to be a reading of the director’s work which refers only to a single philosophical metatext, and not one which speaks to the historical grounding of the dialogue between Malick’s narratives and our finite existences. This lack is in part the result of a failure to connect issues within philosophical studies of Malick to larger currents within the disciplines of cinema studies and philosophy, particularly discourses which emphasize the impending “death of cinema.” Reference to an open-ended and interdisciplinary discourse proposing a variety of approaches to thinking through the relationship between film and philosophy can thus help us advance a more expansive and historically situated approach to Malick’s work, one which accounts for the challenge to the stable subject posited by both Malick’s films and the loss of celluloid itself. In watching Malick’s films and thinking about their inherent transience, we are challenged to think of ourselves not as static, unchanging subjects who can master film (or reality through film) but rather as perpetually becoming subjects who answer the challenge to thought present in both philosophy and certain works of cinema by remaining open to the ways each can enact pressures on our ways of being – our ways of thinking, doing, and making.
At the same time, no part of this study suggests that our philosophical dialogues with Malick’s cinema end in the realization that philosophy (or film) is nothing but a historical artifact of its time. The reason thinkers, and some filmmakers, continue to exact influence outside of their original historical contexts is, I argue, the result of the continual pressures their dialogues with us place on our thinking. (Only a static philosophy or cinema which seeks to wholly master the world could exist outside of history). These dialogues, of course, are animated in different ways at different times, just as no two viewings of a film can ever be quite the same. To that end, in Chapter Two, I spend time trying to puzzle through how film affects our thought after the viewing of the film is completed, a focus on the power of film across time; in Chapter Three, I hone in more specifically on the experience of the projected film and the dialogue which occurs through it, a focus on the power of film in the space of the movie theater. In this chapter, however, I would like to progress carefully towards these discussions by exploring the recent history of different approaches which have attempted to explore potential relationships between philosophy and film, and between the academic disciplines of philosophy and film studies as they are currently practiced, in order to show both how my own approach is situated within these debates and how this approach and Malick’s films complicate and intervene in them.

We find a good guide to the contours of these debates in the work of Jerry Goodenough, who in the introduction to an important recent volume on the relationship between film and philosophy has suggested that there are four ways in which philosophers interested in cinema have historically engaged with the medium. His
categories do not exhaust all possible ways of responding to film philosophically, but they offer a useful point of entry into the range of ideas historically animating the discussion. First, the philosopher “may care about the cinema itself, about the technology and processes and social meanings of watching films.” While Goodenough here explores primarily sociological concerns emerging from philosophy’s historical considerations of the cinema (especially those which draw parallels “between the masses immersed in the darkness and the chained inhabitants of Plato’s cave”), this category would also seem to include various debates pertaining to the ontology of film given the extent to which discussions of ontology are often wrapped up with technology in work on film; such arguments also form the basis of classical film theory (which itself is informed substantially by philosophical aesthetics). Although Goodenough does not focus on the topic of ontology at great length the question of ontology has been crucial to many philosophers engaged with film.

Second, scholars interested in drawing parallels between film and philosophy might use philosophy to “illustrate philosophical themes and issues,” particularly films such as The Matrix (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999), that do not so much introduce new ideas to a preexisting philosophical debate as they act as an index of the existence of such debates, implicitly guiding the interested viewer towards a bookshelf of past philosophical volumes to help explicate the film. For Goodenough, it follows that a film like The Matrix “appeals to some long-standing philosophical problems: to the difference between appearance and reality, to questions of solipsism, the nature of dreaming, and so
on,” without necessarily contributing anything new to our understanding of these debates.

Third, a film may make explicit use of philosophy as content. This is related to the second category but is more specific. Here Goodenough is not referring only to films like *The Matrix* but rather also to films that, often in the form of spoken dialogue or represented figures, actually articulate philosophy on some level as explicit and concrete content. Examples of such figures may be found in the diegetic narrator of *My Night at Maud’s* (Eric Rohmer, 1969) who debates Marxist and Catholic philosophy with other characters, or in the prostitute Nana, who has a conversation with the philosopher Brice Parain in *My Life to Live* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1962). Goodenough himself points to films such as Derek Jarman’s *Wittgenstein* (1993) as an effort that “is imaginative in its visualisations and makes a serious effort at communicating something of Wittgenstein’s thought, and of what Jarman takes to be the link between the thought and the man’s life.” Jarman’s film functions as a lightly fictionalized and highly stylized biopic that does contain, within its diegesis, philosophical ideas rendered as dialogue and reflected in the dramatic and stylistic structure of the film itself, although other more prosaic examples – such as the documentary *Derrida* (Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, 2002) – would presumably be allowed inclusion into Goodenough’s category.

A final category for Goodenough (a category which, as he points out, may include aspects of the first three) is the one he finds most interesting, and the category in some ways aligning most closely with the approach adopted in this study: the idea that film itself can function “as philosophy, as in some sense *doing* philosophy.” Herein the film
functions as something more than an index of already articulated philosophical concerns, and a study of such films need not be concerned with questions of sociology and ontology (although it may certainly draw upon these questions if relevant). Rather, in Goodenough’s last category the film itself contributes something of its own to what we have historically known as philosophizing proper.

We are then left with four approaches which Goodenough cites as lenses through which the philosopher can discuss cinema, from which I have extracted a fifth, ontology, that grows naturally out of Goodenough’s first category. These are the sociological, the ontological, the illustrative, the consideration of explicit philosophical content in films, and the idea of “film as philosophy.” In order to deepen the points I have already made in the introduction, and to clarify how my own approach to Malick’s work engages with this discourse, and why we also need to explicitly address ontology in the framework which Goodenough constructs, I would first like to further investigate four of these categories in greater detail (leaving aside the “explicit philosophical content” category, because it does not saliently figure in the recent debates or in a discussion of Malick’s films, and also because it can be easily considered as a subcategory of Goodenough’s “illustrative” approach). A discussion of these four categories will flesh out how their presuppositions have functioned for other authors within recent discourse on the relevance of philosophy to film (or vice-versa) and within the much more local debates in work on Malick. In the remaining part of the introduction, I first focus on the sociological, ontological, and illustrative approaches, which form the ground for the departure of a potential “film as
philosophy” approach, which I then introduce at the end of this chapter and explore in
greater detail in the next two chapters.

It should also be noted that in the paragraphs which follow I leave Goodenough
behind in his stated interest in answering the question “Why might a philosopher want go
to the cinema?”⁸ Or, rather, I am expanding Goodenough’s question from the point of
view of cinema studies so that it also includes the following: Why would a film critic or
theorist want to consider film, and film theory, philosophically? As Carl Plantinga
observed in 1992, the “relationship between film theory and traditional aesthetics has
been marked to a great extent either by mutual inattention or by open suspicion and
disagreement” and this statement still seems largely true today, only marginally rectified
by the appearance of recent volumes proposing different methodologies and exploring
different problems (which, by and large, are written by professional philosophers, and not
film scholars extending an interest towards philosophy).⁹ Just as this study is interested in
showing how film and philosophy can dialogue with one another, it is equally interested
in showing how film studies and philosophy can achieve a similar dialogue. How, in
other words, can the resources of film theory and the practice of film criticism be
reframed and renewed via a dialogue with philosophy? How might Malick’s own films –
concerned as they are with the meaning their characters make, or fail to make, in their
socially inscribed situations at particular moments in history – themselves instruct us as
to which of these approaches is the most suitable to employ in a dialogue with this
director’s work? In asking these questions we can avoid forming a rigid analytical
framework which would simply determine everything that might be said of the films.
Such frameworks assume a position of transcendence that Malick’s cinema does not seem to welcome. Reframing the question in this manner also allows this project to suggest that the debate over the relationship between film and philosophy is a broad interdisciplinary one interested in the question of how we make meaning in watching films.

**Film, Philosophy, and the Sociology of Viewing**

The first approach to exploring links between film and philosophy, as suggested by Goodenough, is located in the sociological study of cinema. Film theory has itself made important contributions to understanding how film functions in society, often in the form of the study of film reception. This work is often interested in how viewers make meaning in watching films, and stems from historiographical research on early American silent cinema, in which modes of reception had not yet settled into social norms and in which film as a material medium was still fairly novel. These discussions are relevant to a consideration of the relationship between film and philosophy for, as Miriam Hansen has shown (in an application of the work of philosopher Jürgen Habermas to the field of cinema studies), considerations of this history of film reception impact our understanding of how spectators make meaning of films.

For Hansen two general kinds of spectator positions exist, each articulated by particular kinds of films at different moments in history: public and private. According to this view, not all spectatorship is public simply because it occurs in public spaces. The standardized model of studio filmmaking which became the dominant institution of Hollywood in the late 1910s produces a spectator that for Hansen is largely private, since
for Hansen the classical system “involved representational strategies aimed at suppressing awareness of the theater space and absorbing the spectator into the illusionist space on the screen: closer framing, centered composition, and directional lighting; [as well as] continuity editing which created a coherent diegetic space unfolding itself to an ubiquitous invisible observer[.]” As discussed earlier, these are the kinds of films that invite the spectator to transcend historical awareness in an engagement with a plenitude of images that confirms the mastery of the spectator’s (private) subjectivity. For Hansen, this eventual “classical model,” which for her generates a private spectatorship which does not activate the filmgoing experience as a catalyst for a dialogue with others, is in contrast to “transitional” cinema of the early silent era, in which the classical narrative model and its representational strategies had not yet developed. The films of this early period often contained, even if entirely by accident, a self-reflexive quality that, in their foregrounding of the filmgoing experience as a novel event – one that had not yet congealed into the norms of film-viewing that would be generated by the rationalization of the Hollywood system a few years later – produced an audience of public spectators, that is, an audience less standardized by norms of viewing and more inclined to use the space of the film’s projection for reasons pertaining to their particular community, in a dynamically dialogical and contingent fashion. In public spectatorship, then, meaning is made in a way that is relevant to the site of reception; at a certain point the film itself perhaps even becomes irrelevant, beyond its role as catalyst for discussion and debate.

These concepts are useful in understanding the philosophical dialogue possible in an engagement with Malick’s work because in large part Malick’s cinema – in terms of
both its dialogic narrative form and style and its thematic concerns – complicates the binary between public and private upon which Hansen’s work rests. In the same study Hansen has suggested that public forms of spectatorship in the context of transitional cinema re-emerge, intriguingly, in post-World War II European modernist films (especially in the work of Godard and Kluge), films which challenge the dominance of the standardized Hollywood model and its tendency towards an encouragement of private, monological spectatorship. Malick’s work, influenced by both the stylistic self-reflexivity of modernism and certain proto-modernist traditions of silent film (particularly F.W. Murnau), does not only gesture towards a possible public spectatorship on the level of its form, but also thematizes the act making meaning (or failing to make meaning) in the stories the films tell. Further, the current moment in film history to some extent parallels early silent cinema, in that the materiality of the film medium is salient in our discourse once again, not so much because of its novelty (as in the earlier period) but because of our increased self-consciousness of the medium at the moment of its disappearance. In other words, while we may still to some extent remain privately immersed in the stories which Malick tells – his films, after all, are still made in the commercial context of Hollywood and as such emerge from an industry which, by and large, produces films seeking to confirm the subject’s mastery of reality – his formal innovation and our reflections on the materiality of his medium at this moment in history ensures that our private reflections on his work will inevitably brush up against the public and the social, thus prompting us to engage in a wider dialogue and perhaps to even question the very subjectivity we bring to that dialogue.
Malick’s two early films, *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, indeed animate Hansen’s dichotomy of private and public spectatorship as a theme, positing any relationship between the two spheres as a philosophical question. In *Badlands*, as mentioned earlier, Kit mimics James Dean, but in such a way that might give an idea of a private, asocial spectatorship, since his mimicking does not result in a dialogical engagement with the world that might challenge him and thus prompt his becoming. “Kit as Dean” instead operates as little more than one more inflection of his already socially disengaged personality. The case of Holly, however, is more complicated. Far from being in a situation to master her own subjectivity (given that, first and foremost, she is very young), she uses the artifacts of popular culture to express herself, quoting from celebrity magazines and romance novels in her narration. Whether or not she becomes anything through this engagement with popular culture is one of the film’s questions. One reading might suggest that her voice-over, as James Morrison and Thomas Schur point out, “can be understood as nothing but a succession of breathless clichés.” But I would also suggest that Holly never seems fully at ease with these clichés, as Hannah Patterson implies when she points out that Holly becomes even less clear about her identity by the end of the film whereas Kit, disconcertingly, accepts his newfound role as a famous criminal (which, in fact, corresponds closely to the idea he already had of himself: it is only that at the end of the film his unconscious fantasies of attaining fame through murder have become disturbingly real). This is not simply because Holly has been corrupted or wholly “constructed” by popular culture but rather that she would seem, even if dimly, to ache for some kind of original expression – for a kind of rational agency
with which she might negotiate the artifacts of popular culture – but can only manage to
gesture towards that expression through the framework of the (limited) world she knows.
Such an observation can justify Morrison and Schur’s comment that “Malick’s use of
voice-overs emphasizes their status as forms of expression situated somewhere between
the public and the private, muting distinctions between clichéd and original expression, or
between reflex and feeling.”15 Holly is the figure that guides us into the world of
Badlands, even if her reliability as narrator is sometimes thrown into question. Any
knowledge that arises from our experience of the film arises, in large part, in a complex
and often perplexing dialogue with this fictional character, and with the starts and stops
evident in her becoming. Holly’s very blurring of the public and the private in her
narration complicates the theories of spectatorship we may draw upon to make meaning
of an experience of Malick’s work, and it pressures us to think more thoroughly through
how our acts of philosophical becoming may contain qualities of both the public and the
private.

Days of Heaven includes a scene that speaks even more directly to Hansen’s work
on early silent cinema spectatorship in America. A flying circus arrives on the Farmer’s
land, bringing with it an array of attractions including a motion picture camera and a
screen, on which is shown the Charlie Chaplin short The Immigrant (1917; one alternate
title for Chaplin’s film, appropriately enough, was The New World). Although Malick’s
film takes place (and Chaplin’s film is produced) in the late 1910s, several years after the
first establishment of the narrative codes which would form the basis of the classical
Hollywood cinema, the flying circus in Days of Heaven (and the silent comedy of
Chaplin, which at many junctures harkens back to prior forms of comedy such as vaudeville) is a context in which the mode of the earlier “cinema of attractions” prevails, in which films that did not necessarily tell fully developed stories were screened in contexts – amusement parks, carnivals, and circuses – often amenable to the kind of public spectatorship Hansen discusses in her study. As Bill’s younger sister Linda (played by Linda Manz, also the narrator of the film) watches the Chaplin film we see this tension between the private and the public prevail. She is watching the film with other spectators, but Malick’s camera tracks in to her face (and the light from the projector reflecting off of it), suggesting a more private response to the film on the screen. That The Immigrant speaks directly to one of the themes of Malick’s film (the alienation of cheap labor) is clear, but not so clear are the characters’ own understandings of the image they see on the screen. The showing of this Chaplin film within the diegesis of Days of Heaven, albeit public in a number of respects, remains largely private for the characters, and we can infer only so much about the impact of the film on their lives (although the fact that Linda looks much more entranced by the film than the landowning Farmer, who is fidgeting in his seat in this scene, is telling).

In her study, Hansen does not suggest, nor do we have any reason to believe, that philosophers made up a large contingency of these early spectators; she tends to be more interested in the meaning made by moviegoers in general. In fact, one of the first philosophers to turn his attention to cinema, Hugo Münsterberg, admitted that his initial sense that the cinema was an undignified medium was at first an obstacle in his taking the medium seriously. As Noël Carroll has pointed out, philosophers did not become
widely interested in cinema until the 1960s, when film began to be legitimized as a field of inquiry within academia, and by which time a substantial body of films existed with which philosophers could seriously engage. Nonetheless, Hansen’s study of early film and her categories of “private” and “public” – and the various ways, suggested above, that Malick’s films may themselves complicate any final distinction between these categories – have a bearing on any consideration of the relationship between philosophy and film. The films themselves suggest that the creation of meaning might potentially have some social consequence. Further, viewing Malick’s films in an era in which cinema has attained the status as a disappearing cultural object to some extent parallels the earlier, pre-classical era of public spectatorship dramatized in Days of Heaven, when film was still very much a novel invention. The materiality of film may no longer be novel, but like Linda we are once again actively aware of it. Malick’s complication of the public-private dichotomy resonates within the history of philosophy as well, in which art is variously consigned either as an instrument for political progress (a “public” engages with aesthetic objects so as to generate a discourse mobilized for the improvement of society and the formation of collectives) or an autonomous aesthetic object intended for a private contemplation that transcends history (private considerations of art that nonetheless do have the potential to become part of public discourse), two extreme points of a sliding scale which Malick’s cinema complicates.

This discussion of the characters’ ways of making meaning – particularly their ways of establishing knowledge about their existence as historical – will be dealt with further in the chapters on the film, particularly the director’s first two films. We can close
this section by noting that Chaplin’s *The Immigrant* – primarily because it is located at a liminal juncture between the novelty of early silent cinema and the normative model of the later Hollywood institution – seems to hover between these two categories in its appearance in *Days of Heaven*. On the one hand clearly open towards a public and political meaning that seems so relevant to the situation of the characters within Malick’s film, and thus open to a possible instrumentalization that might improve their lives. At the same time, however, Chaplin’s is a work that appeals, to Linda at least, in ways that are ultimately seen as personally affective. The concept of a dialogue between a film and a viewer, the very concept this project as a whole explores, involves blurring these categories to the point where intensely personal and supposedly “private” engagements with the autonomous film object do not transcend history, but rather might function, at a certain juncture, as the very sites for the becoming of a “public,” or socially engaged and relevant, meaning.

**Philosophy and the Ontology of Cinema**

A second approach to exploring relationships between film and philosophy is through arguments pertaining to the ontology of film. The classical period of film theory was characterized by thinkers – greatly influenced by philosophical traditions – interested in defining the essence of cinema, and arguing that the best film productions necessarily conformed to one or another of these essences. Within film studies the two most widely debated ontological constructions are classically opposed to one another: Eisensteinian montage (sometimes broadly referred to as “formalism”) and Bazinian realism. As has
been discussed often, for Eisenstein the essence of film was located in the principle of montage, wherein the spectator was brought to a new idea (a synthesis) out of the combination of two otherwise uninflected images, or shots (these two forming, both metaphorically and literally, a thesis and an antithesis). Film for Eisenstein could then function as argument, guiding the spectator towards particular ideas not actually contained in the shots themselves. For Bazin, montage was manipulation and thus to be avoided, and he instead valorized a long-take aesthetic of extended temporal duration through which the spectator would have the opportunity to contemplate a complex image and arrive at a meaning not through what was thought to be in Eisenstein dialectical coercion but through individualistic, open-ended, rational agency.

This summary of the most famous debate in the history of cinema studies is admittedly far too tidy in that it sheds many of the subtle complexities of both thinkers (we will return to these complexities of both realism and montage in later chapters), but I cite it as a practical means to lead us to a point that is more important for our concern with what it means to conceptualize an ontology. Gilles Deleuze once asked what it meant to have an idea in cinema, and the recent move towards historiography in film studies has led scholars within the discipline to conceive ontology as an always inherently *historical* process: that is, to have an idea in cinema is not so much to use the medium in ways that conform to its timeless material essence but rather to harness the medium in relation to ideas that are creatively enabling within particular historical contexts. Ontological constructions of film in theoretical thinking, rather than operating as universal essences issuing from the material specificity of motion pictures, instead are
shown to often *precede* the material and lead to the wielding of that material in particular ways. Jonathan Walley, in discussing sixties and seventies practices of avant-garde film, has cited the work of both Eisenstein and Bazin (particularly the former’s interest in “pre-cinematic” forms of montage, such as Chinese hieroglyphics, and the latter’s interest in tendencies toward preservation in the history of human culture) in order to usefully suggest how ontologies of film have historically been formed by those thinking about film:

Eisenstein’s claims about the ubiquity of the principle of montage suggest that the medium of film embodies something that existed before film had been invented, and that the invention of film ‘as we know it,’ so to speak, *is* the culmination of a longstanding endeavor to find an art form that exemplifies this principle. The idea of cinema, then, is not a function of the materials of film, but the other way around – the materials of film are a function of the idea of cinema. If Eisenstein’s essays can be thought of as working out an ontology of cinema, then a major dimension of this project is the affinity between certain properties of cinema, and broad cultural and natural phenomena that predate the invention of film.¹⁹

Eisenstein’s fascination with the “cinema” in pre-cinematic phenomena parallels Bazin’s suggestion that film functions as the fulfillment of humanity’s longstanding obsession to preserve the historical past (he himself calls this “the mummy complex”), in film the past preserved as an image of realism into which the camera does not excessively intervene.²⁰ Both ontological constructions suggest that cinema itself is an idea that precedes its otherwise largely contingent mechanical manifestation in the twentieth century. To have
an idea in film – as a creator of film – is not to contemplate the significance of a medium’s essential capabilities (although this is likely what both Eisenstein and Bazin, and other classical theorists and practitioners, thought they were doing), but to realize longstanding historical ideas in the form of films. In the ontological projects of both Eisenstein and Bazin – themselves informed by philosophy – cinema is not born out of a material specificity but rather out of a certain point of development in the histories of particular philosophies. These familiar but still curious and provoking theories remind us that the experience of thinking through film is nothing less than the phenomenon whereby cinema and its materials return to philosophy, in a circular manner, from which its impulse and purpose was in large part born.

For both Bazin and Eisenstein cinema thus curiously acts as an at least partial fulfillment of ideas that have existed for quite some time. Yet “the idea of cinema,” as this study as a whole endeavors to show, can be inflected by concrete experiences of particular cinematic works, generating in relation to these philosophies new conceptual significance. In terms of Malick’s work, both of these ontological constructs thus inform our encounter with his films not so much as determinative frameworks but rather as creatively enabling ideas, as possibilities that might be wielded in any number of rich new ways. Imagine, for example, their potential relation to the director’s motif of the journey, and its suggestion of a tension between preservation (which for Bazin is to some extent a property of the film image itself) and becoming (the principle of signification produced after the event of montage is perceived). As Stanley Cavell once remarked, Malick’s work functions on one level in a Bazinian sense, guiding our attention to “a
fundamental fact of film’s photographic basis: that objects participate in the photographic presence of themselves; they participate in the re-creation of themselves on film; they are essential in the making of their appearances.”21 There is a sense then that something of the filmed object is preserved in the experience of a Malick film (so much so that it becomes worth remarking upon those occasions when something of the object is not preserved but effaced by Malick’s camera, as I will suggest in the chapter on Badlands). Yet Malick’s narrative strategies frequently refuse the editing patterns of the classical cinema or even neorealism, in which cuts often occur on character movement or in relation to a clear, causal narrative progression. In other words, while objects in the world are often brought to our attention in Malick, editing itself is also often salient, generating associations not only based on information included within particular images but also based on information inferred across particular images through the connection of two images that are not connected in any obvious causal manner.

To make these observations is only to begin a stylistic analysis of Malick’s work and to point towards the stylistic heterogeneity of influences that go well beyond Bazin and Eisenstein. On a fundamental level it suggests that his work takes as two of its crucial aesthetic possibilities the competing ontological constructions of Eisenstein and Bazin, which function for Malick’s cinema as enabling historical ideas rather than constricting material essences to which his practice must conform. Indeed, the fact that Bazin’s and Eisenstein’s ideas exist as ideas apart from material suggests not only how they might survive the disappearance of the film medium, but also how their pursuits for ontological stability become ironic when we remind ourselves that the object they sought to
ontologize is the entropic medium of film. Yet the inherent entropic nature of film’s materials, if not its conceptual essence, still remains valuable to our thinking. Just as the impermanence of film challenges any desire we might have to master the visual world it presents to us, this impermanence also powerfully reminds us that any ontology constructed in reference to it will ultimately exist in an historical dynamic. In this light, ontology becomes important to a discussion of film’s philosophical import not because we should be concerned with articulating once and for all the timeless ontology of cinema, for a medium which exists in time can hardly be conceived as timeless. The history of ontological investigations provides instead a fecund resource for filmmakers and critics seeking to harness and reflect upon the stylistic possibilities of film in particular ways and for particular purposes.

Films Illustrating Philosophy

The above two sections suggest that sociology and ontology are both relevant to such a discussion of Malick’s films, as both can contribute to this study’s attempt to situate our engagement with his work as a philosophical and historical dialogue. By themselves, however, they are perhaps not sufficient approaches. After all, Malick’s work seems to intrigue us beyond its social commitments and no satisfactory analysis of his work can rest solely upon the question of ontology. The “illustrative” approach offers a third way to consider how we might engage philosophically with Malick’s work.

In the “illustrative” approach film, considerations of film continue to look backward towards already articulated ideas, but in this case ideas having less to do with
the potential essence of a medium or a concern with relationships between film and society and more to do with the history of philosophical argumentation broadly speaking, and as such philosophy which goes beyond the bounds of questions pertaining to the medium. What does it mean for a film to “illustrate” a philosophical idea? For Paisley Livingston, to suggest that film can function as philosophy, understood by Livingston as the contribution of wholly original ideas to traditions of thinking, is too immodest (and for him ultimately untenable). “Films can provide vivid and emotionally engaging illustrations of philosophical issues,” Livingston writes, “and when sufficient background knowledge is in place, reflections about films can contribute to the exploration of specific theses and arguments, sometimes yielding enhanced philosophical understanding.”

Here, Livingston holds onto a notion of medium specificity in terms of style, suggesting that to “appreciate a film as a work of art one must ask how successfully its themes have been expressed or embodied by its style and by devices specific to the medium,” a quote that speaks to the centrality of ontology to arguments about the philosophical capacities of cinema and as such it is a point to which we will return in subsequent chapters.

Although Livingston characterizes his own approach as modest, other thinkers who follow his path suggest that in fact the idea of a film functioning as an illustration of a preexisting philosophical argument is in fact quite complex. Thomas Wartenberg, for example, cites John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) as a film possessing a “perceptive association of the rise of the legal order with the concomitant rise of a press more concerned with images than truth,” in turn asking “its viewers to see two fundamental social institutions of our society – the legal order and the press – as
linked in their adherence to deception over truth.” Wartenberg’s point is not that Ford’s film is articulating, exactly, this philosophical concern; it is providing one particularly useful illustration (or enactment, or dramatization) of it, evoking it for those viewers who are already familiar with the argument.

Wartenberg has suggested that the idea of film functioning as an illustration of philosophical arguments is more complex than it at first seems, and in fact emerges from the history of philosophy itself. Wartenberg reminds his reader that illustrations – or evocative, descriptive language that, in the context of an otherwise straightforward philosophical argument, can contribute meaning to debates – have a long history in the presentation of philosophical problems. He points to the thought experiments of Plato (particularly his parable of the cave) as examples of how philosophy has often relied upon figurative language to enable readers and listeners to understand advanced arguments. Wartenberg also goes on to suggest that illustrations themselves are always quite important to the texts they modify; he points to the tradition of children’s books (particularly John Tenniel’s illustrations of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*) as examples of how “our imaginings of such characters are determined by illustrations.” He contrasts this example to the illustrations of Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, in which the drawings function in a much less significant manner, as “mere supplements to the text, designed to make the text more accessible to readers, especially those who are young.” In this line of thinking, philosophically significant films are those films that serve as more than mere illustrations of preexisting arguments.
The “illustrative” approach has been more influential than any other in work on Malick, largely in writing that associates his films with the work of Martin Heidegger. Taking their cue from Stanley Cavell, Marc Furstenau and Leslie MacEvoy argue that *The Thin Red Line* is a philosophical film because it engages with the inherently self-reflexive character of the cinematic image, and they argue that the film is a specifically Heideggerian one in that it reawakens our lost sense of what Heidegger terms *Being*.28 Kaja Silverman echoes this approach in her work on the same film, paraphrasing Heidegger’s notion that “human beingness” (*Dasein*) is defined as to be “held out” into the “nothing,” or, in other words, a void of nonbeing “out of which we have emerged and to which we will return.”29 Only through encountering this nothingness, she asserts, can we realize our potential and help others do the same. She reads Malick’s films as works that reflect the phenomenon of Being, in particular *The Thin Red Line* for its depiction of a situation (war) in which Being is not allowed full realization. While Silverman states boldly in the first half of her essay that Malick’s films “do philosophy,” the approach she employs is in fact more modest, and is more appropriately classified in the “illustrative” category, as she is primarily interested in the ways in which Malick’s work dramatizes Heidegger’s thinking.30

These are two of the best examples of work that see in Malick’s cinema philosophical significance, and we will engage with their arguments in greater detail in the chapter on *The Thin Red Line*. Despite the suggestive criticism they contain, however, neither essay deals with some of the limitations that the illustrative approach poses for a conception of “film as philosophy.” The illustrative approach, broadly speaking, suggests
that film can only gesture towards a philosophical truth, moreover a truth that has already been established; and in many ways, to invoke the public-private distinction once more, this truth remains a private one (or a highly limited public one), for it can only speak, for Wartenberg as for Livingston, to audiences who are already well-versed in the philosophical issues the film evokes, and not to a larger public. In effect, the film is serving to enhance or at least significantly inflect an argument that might appeal to professional philosophers but perhaps to few others. The implications of arguments posed by Wartenberg and Livingston (and to some extent Malick’s critics) suggest that their authors are unmoved by Walter Benjamin’s insistence that cinema held great promise as an art form precisely because it gestures towards a new meaning that relies upon a powerful intervention in tradition: “[The film’s] social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.”31 Indeed, Wartenberg himself seems to reject such an idea entirely when he suggests that cinema, far from constituting a medium that revolutionizes thought, instead functions at least initially as an obstacle to thought, insofar as “engaging with films as philosophy allows us to see that, despite their form, films can have serious aspirations [my italics].”32

By displacing any consideration of the form of film, Wartenberg’s concern in his work remains primarily with a thematic reading of films in reference to the tradition of already articulated philosophical ideas, and includes no attempt to deal with the ways forms and styles of cinema, in addition to themes, pressure us to think through, in inventive new ways, how we respond to history through our own finite situation. But it
might also, of course, be incorrect to infer that Malick is himself fully moved by the
notion of the destruction of tradition which some have read into Benjamin’s statement,
given his engagement with past forms of culture reflected in the influences on and
allusions in his own filmmaking, ranging from past instances of cinema (European
postwar modernism, Murnau, Sjöstrom, Dovzhenko) and philosophy (Heidegger,
Thoreau, Emerson, Wittgenstein) to literature (Walt Whitman, Henry James, Albert
Camus, Norman Mailer, James Jones, Flannery O’Connor) and music (Saint-Saëns is
used in Days of Heaven and Wagner in The New World). Both Wartenberg, as a thinker
engaged with film, and Malick, as a director engaged with the creation of films, are both
eager to in some sense preserve tradition.

But the radical potential of the unstable and always changing medium of film to
instigate what we can call a future uncertain becoming, a challenge to our very
subjectivities – and the potential of Malick’s characters to become something else in their
journeys, even if they usually ultimately fail at this – is left completely dormant upon in
the “illustrative” approach, which remains most comfortable within a stable view of
philosophical tradition. Indeed, in being oriented almost wholly towards past
philosophical arguments and thematic relationships to those arguments, the approach is
limited in its ability to comment meaningfully on the film medium and its transient
existence within history, and the inflection this transience performs upon any sustained
reflection on the poetics of cinema. The approach in and of itself, although certainly
useful, thus remains ultimately limited in an analysis of Malick’s work. Film in this
approach may enrich us to see the already articulated philosophical text in new ways, but
in such an approach it cannot escape it; its identity is always in the end fully and
determinatively coterminous with it.

This project’s own approach to some extent holds onto this idea of film as an
illustration of past philosophical problems (particularly in reference to the relationship
between Malick, Heidegger, and other philosophers), for this gives us one way to
conceptualize the link between film and past traditions of philosophy and art. It is an
approach also suitable in many ways to a consideration of Malick’s cinema, which often
stages its dramas in the historical past and is influenced in terms of both style and content
by important cultural precursors. However, such a framework by itself cannot allow us to
articulate how experiences of his films, and of film more broadly, has the potential to
assist us in our own sometimes unstable process of becoming, and in the approach’s
general inattention towards the power of form and style, and the medium itself, it says
little about what the aesthetic possibilities of cinema might become as the film medium
begins to recede into history. To further the value of the “illustrative” approach – as well
as the sociological and ontological approaches already discussed – this study will,
through its dialogues with Malick’s films, argue that we can hold onto these approaches
while at the same time extending them within the fourth (and most open-ended)
approach, endeavoring to show that film can function, in some sense, as philosophy.

**Film as Philosophy**

Jerry Goodenough’s consideration of the “film as philosophy” approach demonstrates its
usefulness in moving beyond the other approaches, while at the same time retaining some
of their strengths. Goodenough claims that the philosophical powers of film emerge from the viewer’s careful engagement with narrative form (in his argument, this is above all an engagement with character), and as such is primarily an effect of a narrative structure that deals seriously with philosophical problems in an insightful way. Goodenough suggests that in order for a film to function “as philosophy” – that is, not as only an illustration of already articulated philosophical concerns or as a means to explore sociological and ontological topics related to film that may be of philosophical interest – it must in some sense be “possible to understand watching a film as itself engaging in philosophy [my italics].” Here Goodenough performs a partial dislocation of the philosophical act proper, whereby philosophy accompanies both the post-filmic reflection upon film experience (as in the three approaches already discussed) but is also involved with the actual viewing of film.

Goodenough’s example provides a point of entry into this idea. Goodenough’s reading of Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner (1982, re-release in 1992) suggests that the film animates a preexisting philosophical debate, namely David Dennett’s argument about the “six necessary conditions that something must fulfill in order to be a person.” Blade Runner’s story is about a race of artificially created human beings (called “replicants” in the diegesis) built in a late twenty-first-century America. These replicants are to labor in colonies on other planets, helping to create the conditions for possible human existence in other parts of the galaxy (seen as a need in this future given planet Earth’s pollution and overpopulation problems). The replicants are barred from traveling to Earth, although some manage to do so; elite detectives, known as “blade runners,” are employed to track
down and kill them, generating a range of ethical dilemmas pertaining mostly to the question of personhood. For Goodenough, what is interesting about *Blade Runner* is not that it merely replicates the already articulated argument which Dennett has posited; it is that the film eventually goes beyond those ideas, because what makes the experience of *Blade Runner* function as a potential site for philosophical meaning-making is its *affective* dimension. Goodenough puts it this way:

*Blade Runner* does not just make us intellectually aware that the replicants satisfy many possible conditions for personhood. Rather, by sharing this portion of their lives, by seeing their quest for life, the way they relate to each other, by comparing it with Deckard’s job of termination, we must inevitably come to feel for them, anger, fear, lust at one particular point, and, at the end, perhaps a profound pity and admiration. How could anyone *not* treat these replicants as persons? Society has somehow gone terribly wrong here. The film allows us to perceive and feel, to experience what is happening at a deeper and more persuasive level than any mere written account could manage. Engaging with the film forces us to recognise that we largely share a Wittgensteinian ‘form of life’ with these replicants.35

The Wittgensteinian “form of life” which Goodenough here refers to is not the life of a human being, but rather like the life of a household pet, creatures “which share a form of life with us, not sufficiently to enable us to think of them as proper persons but certainly enough for us to see them as feeling creatures like ourselves.”36 Here the rational is not so much displaced as it is accompanied by emotion and empathetic engagement, which
pressures us not to rationally accept an argument (which has more or less likely been already accepted or rejected prior to the screening of the film) but to see what is at stake in those rational arguments on the level of our everyday interactions with other beings. An empathetic experience, in Goodenough’s account, generates a certain kind of ethical dimension to our engagement with film.

Goodenough’s account of “film as philosophy” is important because it allows us to expand our notion of how a film engages with the ideas of the past, in that it does not simply illustrate previously existing ideas but rather animates them in an experience of cinema that, on one level, is involved with the empathetic engagement with character and thus with the concrete ethical import of our abstract concepts. It thus provides one step towards understanding the dialogue which Malick’s films offer to its viewers. This dialogue with the films intersects with, at certain key points, the historical situations of the characters on the screen, and thus any concepts we generate in and after our empathetic engagements with the characters in our experience of the film must speak, on some level, to those situations; in other words, we have an ethical responsibility (as Chapter Three will further suggest) in responding to and reflecting upon our experiences of empathy when we produce meaning. Unlike Blade Runner, which asks us to locate our empathy with characters in an entirely imagined fictional world existing in the future, Malick’s work depicts moments recognizable from American history, even if they are fictionalized. His films absorb us in authentic and often lyrical recreations of the historical past, often leading to Bazinian moments of revelation, yet they stylize those worlds through narrative strategies that are often defamiliarizing, fragmented, and
distancing, pressuring us to generate concepts that might also respond to such artifice. 
Our engagement with characters in Malick, as subsequent chapters will argue, is thus a 
mixture of empathy and distance, a distance engendered not only by formal strategies but 
by the temporal distance which separates us from the historical characters depicted on-
screen.

In this dialectic between immersive absorption in authentic imagery and more 
distanced contemplation, Malick’s work returns us to Hansen’s understanding of public 
and private film spectatorship, and the ways in which films might be made sense of by 
viewers. It is in both Malick’s films and in this model of “film as philosophy,” however, 
that we begin to understand that any act of viewing – even one which begins privately, in 
a state of immersive engagement with fictional characters – has the potential to produce 
socially relevant meaning. For Goodenough this meaning begins in the act of viewing 
itself, wherein our empathetic engagement with fictional worlds generates an ethical 
response with consequences for our own world. This empathetic engagement does not 
occur transparently through the medium of film, of course, and thus its extrafilmic ethical 
import, is, in Malick, refracted through a sometimes fragmentary and always richly 
complex narrative form and style that further pressures us to generate concepts that might 
speak self-consciously and self-reflexively of the empathetic experience we have just 
had. Further, connecting philosophical meaning-making to the phenomenological 
experience of the film medium might grant us a path towards further reflection upon the 
impermanence of the film medium and the parallels which might develop between this 
impermanence, the fragile lives and worlds Malick’s cinema depicts, and our own finite
situation in history as we watch the films. Such engagement and such reflection often results in a verbal account, as in Goodenough’s interpretation of Blade Runner (which, it should be said, focuses primarily on a thematic reading of that film and less on the theoretical implications I am gleaning from it). These words are generated via recourse to both philosophy and the experienced film, and in a way that makes us sensitive to ethical and conceptual dimensions of each that perhaps were unrealizable by themselves.

**Conclusion**

The thesis of this project is that Malick’s films – visions inscribed on the curiously “mortal” medium of film at a moment in history when cinema seems to be mutating into other forms of the moving image – engage viewers in an historical, philosophical dialogue. The questions Malick asks us, and the impermanence of film itself, preempts any attempt to statically master the world and instead pressures us to more fully answer the challenge of philosophy and philosophical cinema in a more open-ended and uncertain act of becoming. In watching Malick, as in reading philosophy, we may become something else, not a becoming which prompts a transcendence of our historical situation (as, say, in the art and philosophy of the Romantics) but rather a becoming which is tethered profoundly to our own historical ways of being – our ways of thinking, doing, and making. By exploring Goodenough’s introduction to the concept of “film as philosophy” and the various other approaches to studying film within the discipline of philosophy, this chapter has sought to affirm the importance of these approaches to cinema studies by connecting them to some debates circulating in the latter discipline.
Malick’s own films have posed challenges which necessitate this connection. It is in an engaged and fine-grained dialogue with the film experience and the pressures it puts on our thinking, then, that we can begin to understand the films functioning “as philosophy.”

Although I have, in this chapter, begun to show how Malick’s narrative strategies and film style complement Goodenough’s approach to “film as philosophy,” one cannot plunge immediately into a full-scale analysis of Malick’s films to show how philosophy “happens” in an engagement with Malick’s work, because precisely how one dialogues with a film – how one engages with its formal and thematic contours in the production of philosophical meaning which speaks to the fictional worlds of the films and their parallels and intersects the world we live in – is still yet to be fully theorized. In an attempt to fill this gap, this study continues with two further preparatory chapters which function as a propaedeutic outlining my approach to analyzing Malick’s cinema. In crafting a propaedeutic – rather than a methodological framework – I am arguing against a certain tradition in film theory whereby an analytical framework or methodology is articulated so that it may be applied to the films in question to produce an interpretation that often succeeds in doing little more than confirming what the method already knew. A propaedeutic, much like Wittgenstein’s late philosophy, jettisons the mechanical application of a theory that may not be amenable to its objects and instead only drives us “to attain a perspicuous grasp of the distinctive concepts [theorists] use in studying artistic phenomenon…helping scholars of the arts to clarify the forms of understanding that are appropriate to the phenomena they study.”37 Such a study may certainly continue to draw upon the conceptual resources of theory, of course, insofar as it helps us get
closer to understanding the nature of the historical dialogues at work within Malick’s fictional worlds and at work in our experience of those worlds, without determining or greatly impinging upon what may be said about them.


3 A useful overview of the history of ontological arguments about cinema can be found in Peter Lehman, *Defining Cinema* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997).


9 Carl Plantinga, “Film Theory and Aesthetics: Notes on a Schism,” in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51, no. 3 (Summer 1993), 445.


12 Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 132. Hansen mentions filmmakers like Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein, Jean-Luc Godard, Alexander Kluge and Chantal Akerman as filmmakers who “stand not just for stylistic alternatives to mainstream film but, more important, for an alternative organization of experience, both through film and in the cinema. They project a different organization of the public sphere.”


14 Hannah Patterson, “Two Characters in Search of a Direction,” 38.

The phrase “cinema of attractions” was coined by Tom Gunning in an attempt to describe the novelty of early film experience prior to the formation of the classical Hollywood system. For a discussion of the relevance of the “cinema of attractions” model to a discussion of film, see the recent volume *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).


Paisley Livingston, “Theses on Cinema as Philosophy,” 16.


Thomas E. Wartenberg, “Beyond Mere Illustration,” 25.

Thomas E. Wartenberg, “Beyond Mere Illustration,” 24.


Kaja Silverman, “All Things Shining,” 323.


Thomas E. Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen*, 8.


CHAPTER TWO: HISTORICAL TIME AND THE THOUGHT OF FILM

I am able to engage the visible in a dialogue that results from the marked similarities and remarked differences between what I see and what is seen by another even as I see it… It is in this convergence and divergence of perception that the hermeneutic relation to cinematic technology arises in the spectator’s experience.

-Vivian Sobchack

We may indeed be interested in what photography and film are, but we are also equally or indeed more concerned by what we have valued qualitatively in the experience of contemplating them, or indeed by what we ourselves become in watching films. Throughout the history of film theory, film aesthetics has concerned itself primarily with the analysis of space. Here, I want to suggest that what most powerfully affects us in film is an ethics of time.

-D.N. Rodowick

Space, Time, and Experiences of Cinema

In the introduction I suggested that the notion of “film as philosophy” involves a special attention to how watching a film might encourage the act of philosophy. Our present historical context also reminds us that the transience of the film medium itself is an inescapable component of this act of watching, and thus an inescapable aspect of any meaning we might presently make of cinema. As every act of viewing celluloid is, in part, an act of remembering, it becomes impossible for viewers to escape from the awareness of their own finite existence as they watch fragile strips of film projected on a screen. Malick’s cinema, I argue, answers this transience creatively, acknowledging the inherent impossibility of the finite medium of film to master the world and instead using the medium as a poetic and dramatic force through which to pose questions about the world to the spectator. More concretely, these questions are often closely related to the experiences of the characters within the fictionalized historical worlds of Malick’s films. Empathetic engagement with characters and with the larger fictional worlds in and
against which those characters are figured generates conceptual activity for the spectator who wants to think about Malick’s questions. This thinking is at once tethered to tradition (as in Goodenough’s reading of *Blade Runner* which draws upon already articulated philosophical concepts) but our thought is also pressured to think through what meaning might arise in the new experience each film offers, even as it builds upon tradition. This meaning is often of an ethical nature, as when a film animates ideas not in the form of abstract argumentation but in the form of what is (even in Malick’s cinema, marked as it is at times achieves by a measured distance from its characters) a more direct engagement in which our concepts – the ones we might bring to the theater and the ones we might form anew after the experience of the film – have an immediate stake.

In turn, the phenomenological experience of the filmic is also accompanied by what may be called post-filmic thinking. Central to post-filmic thinking is hermeneutic activity, the making of the film’s meaning via a reflection upon the experience of the film and extension and elaboration of meanings which are only nascent in the experience of the film as it itself unfolds. It is in reflecting upon an experience of Malick’s cinema philosophically that one comes to recognize a “hermeneutical pressure,” as it were, at work in the films, on the level of both diegesis and spectator experience. Rather than functioning as already completed philosophical treatises in the form of cinema, or as transcendent visions of the world that seek to master reality, Malick’s films instead creatively express what is yet to be thought. In this they are dialogical; philosophy is nascent in the films. The characters viewers empathize with in Malick are not professional thinkers, but they are curious about the world and, as the introduction began
to suggest, they pose questions about it. In the early films what the characters (and we) still have to learn is suggested through the gaps and ambiguities of what is to some extent a naïve narration, although one which nonetheless speaks (particularly in the case of Holly in *Badlands*) of a frustrated desire to expand the intellectual framework through which the world is encountered and addressed. These ambiguities and questions are then transferred to the audience, albeit in a slightly different form. Especially in the later films, *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*, the direct narration of the earlier films is abandoned in favor of impressionistic questions and musings which give a more immediate sense of characters posing questions and seeking answers. One striking way to think about the distinct differences in the strategies of questioning that exist between the early and late films is via recourse to the idea of character engagement. In the first two films we are likely to find ourselves engaged with a character prior to discovering the key questions or enigmas which surround that character’s existence (many of these enigmas will only be apparent after the films are over). In the later films, meanwhile, it is often the questions or ambiguities posed directly in the impressionistic voice-overs that provide our first point of entry into understanding the human figures inscribed on the screen.

In any event, it is apparent that although Malick’s characters are very good at posing questions to us, they are not quite philosophers themselves. As Leo Bersani and Ulysee Dutoit have written in their sharp analysis of *The Thin Red Line*, the questions Malick’s characters pose “are all very large – one might also say naïve – questions and reflections. The first thing to be said about [these questions and reflections] is that while Malick’s film takes them very seriously, it doesn’t treat them as philosophical issues.”

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But while what the characters say may not have “intellectual weight” (given their various socially inscribed situations, how could they achieve “philosophy”?), this is only because their questioning of the world is still in a rather early state of becoming. In absence of intellectual weight or an already articulated set of philosophical ideas communicated directly via character discourse, Malick’s films instead place upon both viewer and character a kind of hermeneutical pressure – a perception and expression of images and sounds that gesture towards a meaning that has yet to be made, or is still in the early stages of formation. This gesture is a pressure to make sense of embodied experience and historical situation that is simultaneously expressed by and within the dramatic fictional worlds of Malick’s films, and it also enacts a pressure on the spectator, who must come to terms with rich and creatively organized images and sounds that do not reward the mechanical application of preexisting analytical frameworks.

The empathetic experience with character that Goodenough locates as central to the “film as philosophy” approach, granting an ethical weight to the concepts we bring to the theater and the concepts we might create upon watching the film, is thus in Malick also the site of thought which is still in the process of becoming. Our dialogues with characters and their fictional worlds in Malick is a creative co-articulation of meaning which only accumulates the kind of “intellectual weight” mentioned above, gradually across (and after) the experience of the films. Most of our thinking in watching film occurs upon reflection – after the film is over – and this idea suggests further the gap, ambiguity, and distance finally separating us from Malick’s characters, regardless of the dialogical nature of our empathetic engagement with them while the film is being
projected. This ambiguity is acknowledged in the quality of the voice-overs themselves (unreliable narration in the early films, and impressionistic questioning in the later ones) and the modernist inflection of the narrative form and style of the films; Malick’s characters are thus unreliable narrators or unsure participants in a dialogue because, like us, they occupy no omniscient and masterful point-of-view, and the formal organization of their fictional worlds also reflects a similar fragmentation. It is perhaps inaccurate to think of the poetic voice-overs in Malick’s films as ultimately either “transcendent” or “transcendental,” even though their lyrical quality suggests the characters often yearn for transcendence, and a way of understanding their experience. Much of what is poignant about the voice-overs in Malick arises from the fact that they originate from characters that are historically embodied and socially inscribed in situations that they do not fully control or understand, yet who yearn for something else even as they are not quite able to find what it is they seek.

But although this lack of omniscience in character narration and voice-over is also what prevents our engagement with them from being monological, it further speaks to the ethical quality our empathetic experience of Malick’s fictional worlds holds, especially in the post-filmic act of hermeneutical reflection. The ethical contours of this reflection will be dealt with in greater detail at the end of Chapter Three, but it is useful to mention it briefly here. Insofar as Malick’s work is committed to perceiving and expressing the social situations of particular characters, and insofar as the voice-overs express acts of meaning-making that are continually in a process of becoming, our hermeneutical reflection must also keep in mind what the characters do not manage to become. Malick’s
films never end with characters having attained a kind of knowledge that might finalize our dialogical engagement with them. The hermeneutical pressure – and whatever intellectual weight it has accumulated by the end of the film – persists after the film is over, transferred this time onto the film spectator (and the interpretive communities to which that spectator belongs) exclusively. Of course, this is true to some extent with any fictional film (only contemporary documentaries present us with images of individuals who, for a time at least, “live on” after the film is over), but with Malick it becomes unique insofar as our engagement with character is also an engagement with characters who, within their diegetic worlds, do not quite possess the means to fully express and realize thought and thus to become more fully. If the social situation of the characters is going to continue to “speak” in our hermeneutical reflections, then, it is the spectator’s act of post-filmic writing in which this speaking will have to happen.

This study has thus far suggested that empathetic engagement with characters and the fictional worlds in which they reside is a key aspect of the “film as philosophy” approach, and that in Malick our dialogical engagements with character and with their worlds are the site of what has yet to be thought. This chapter and the one that follows attempt to build upon these observations by reflecting further upon two registers of the film experience that speak to our attempt to understand film as philosophy: The post-filmic act of interpretation (discussed in this chapter in relation to a concern with historical time), where the empathetic engagement with character and experience of narrative form and style is reflected upon; and the filmic act of projection (discussed in Chapter Three in relation to a discussion of historical space), where the empathetic
engagement with character and the experience of form and style actually “happens” in front of the projected film. These reflections on historical time and space (and, of course, the relationship which constantly occurs between these reflections) are meant to form a preparatory framework for the analysis of Malick’s cinema undertaken in the final four chapters of the study.

Before progressing with this chapter’s primary focus on time and the post-filmic act of interpretation, however, it is worth discussing why space and time are such crucial poles for our investigation into the possibility of “film as philosophy.” These two words delineate two paths in philosophical studies of cinema, historically often opposed to one another. On the one hand, the first quote at the beginning of this chapter, taken from Vivian Sobchack’s work on the phenomenology of film experience, is supported by a theory of meaning-making and experience that is defined throughout her study via recourse to the subject’s experience in historical space. Elsewhere in her book The Address of the Eye, Sobchack writes: “It is not time, but space – the significant space lived as and through the objective body-subject, the historical space of situation – that grounds the response to…the question of cinematic signification[.]” Like Linda’s viewing of The Immigrant in Days of Heaven, our own experiences with films involves both a concrete interaction with a medium that is creatively constituted in particular ways by filmmakers at certain historical moments, a medium which involves not only our cognitive participation but also affects us on a subjective, bodily level. Here the specificity of any medium is less important than the various ways in which filmmakers flesh out that specificity, as it is understood at any given juncture, in particular historical
situations. (“The New American Cinema,” for example, is a phrase which broadly
describes one moment in American film history encompassing the production of Malick’s
first two films; it describes, as the study will explore later in greater detail, the historical
and social ground from which the films were made).

But just as powerfully, and suggesting that film experience is not just an
experience of particular objects in particular historical spaces, film is also an experience
of filmic objects in and across historical time, in which subjects are called upon not
simply to receive films within the frame of their own subjectivity, but to more radically
answer the challenge of films that pose questions challenging any notion of a visual,
spatial mastery of the world. In other words, in and after certain film experiences both we
and the film seem to become something else, or at least have the potential to become
something else. D.N. Rodowick, for example, is less confident than Sobchack that we can
be assured of what it is that cinema actually is, in any stable ontological sense, given the
unstable nature of the moving-image historically and the radically changing nature of
exhibition contexts in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries (change that
echoes, in a different register, the vast variety of contingent exhibition contexts available
in the early twentieth century). He reminds us that our experiences in historical spaces
inevitably lead to considerations of historical time, and that as a result

psychologically the spectator is always in pursuit of a double absence: the
hallucinatory projection of an absent referent in space as well as the slipping away
of images in time. The inherent virtuality of the image is a fundamental condition
of cinema viewing where the ontological insecurity of film as an aesthetic object is posed as both a spatial uncertainty and a temporal instability.\textsuperscript{5}

On one level, of course, we are sure of what film is, just as we are sure of where we encounter those specific objects we designate as “films,” even if we grant that there are several varieties of the moving image (television, for example, or computer imagery). If still uncertain, we can (impractically, of course) demand the projectionist to stop the film and demand to see the 35mm film print in order to reassure ourselves that what we are seeing is, indeed, a film object in at least one sense.\textsuperscript{6} If we are confronted with just one film in just one historical space, the question of filmic ontology becomes, at least on the face of it, much easier to grapple with. We seem to know film because we know very well the spaces in which we have encountered, and even the significant differences between projected 35mm celluloid and digital DVDs do not always shake fully the belief that we can confidently know and master the objects encountered in these spaces.

But the experience of the film is not always concomitant with a projection of the film. This spatial certainty eventually gives way to a certain temporal instability, which tends to throw a question mark around our initial confidence regarding the ontological identity of the film object just experienced (or any of the other ideas we had in the theater), a question generated whenever we deign to talk and write about films. Put simply, it is hard to hold onto something – in writing or otherwise – as slippery as an “experience,” despite the best efforts of writers like Sobchack to do so. Writers on the cinema often find themselves projecting a past experience onto the present, into a re-viewing of films; thus, despite Sobchack’s emphasis on space, reflection in and upon our
experience of historical time and our becoming through time is as important as a
discussion of the experience of historical space. It has often been said that this
accessibility of the moving image through new technologies (such as the DVD video
disc) has made it easier to hold onto the original experience of the film, or at least has
made it easier to closely analyze the film relative to an earlier moment in cinema studies
when the only option was to obtain a copy of the print for close analysis of a film print on
a flatbed. In a way this is true; despite the fact that the film changes when it is transferred
– on digital disc it is, of course, no longer celluloid we are looking at – on a practical
level the images in their transposed form are present and open for re-view in a manner
that they had not been before. If I am unsure about my reasons for judging a film in a
particular way, or if I need to confirm my memory of the formal or stylistic composition
of a particular sequence, I can watch it again. If I cannot remember exactly what I
thought and exactly how I felt during a particular scene, I can try to watch the scene or
indeed the entire film again and see if I experience it in the same way.

However, not all of these kinds of re-views are quite the same, even after we have
admitted that on a fundamental level film viewing and disc viewing are different (a
difference located in the shift from celluloid materiality to the ones and zeroes of digital
encoding, and in the loss of frames when film is digitally compressed on digital disc).
Ascertaining the formal organization of a sequence is a fairly straightforward and
uncreative process; revising intellectual judgments is perhaps less mechanical, but more
objective and perhaps slightly more creative. The last of these forms of re-viewing,
however – the attempt to experience both emotionally and intellectually what one once
experienced in the past – suggests that a certain temporal slipperiness exists in our post-
filmic contemplation of, and creation of significance through, the moving image, even on
a format such as the digital disc which allows us to revisit films in a manner not available
in earlier moments in the history of film studies. This slipperiness is exacerbated, I think,
in another aspect of the re-viewing of films, for film history itself – the past, present, and
future of the external world in and against which we engage with fictional worlds –
comes to exert additional kinds of hermeneutical pressures on our thinking and writing
about film. As Laura Mulvey has suggested in her study of the experience of the filmic in
the age of the digital, the emergence of DVDs, which virtually house the history of film
celluloid via the digital in such a way that much of the past becomes accessible at the
touch off a button, has changed some of the ways in which we think about films. As
Mulvey points out, the experience of watching a disc at home “is far removed from that
of the traditional cinema audience bound to watch a film in its given order at 24 frames a
second…Once the consumption of movies is detached from the absolute isolation of
absorbed viewing…the cohesion of narrative comes under pressure from external
discourses, that is, production context, anecdote, history.”

The private experience of
cinema within four walls gives way to the more nebulous frame of digital disc reception,
in which film’s specific contours are leveled out to become just one more node on a
longer line of “cultural production,” and thus also to larger discourses (a phenomenon
Timothy Corrigan once described as “a cinema without walls”).

To some extent, of course, Mulvey is exaggerating her case, for a certain kind of
pressure already exists in the original “isolation of absorbed viewing,” as I have already
suggested, in the form of a hermeneutical pressure that the film itself inaugurates as we view it. The external discourses which Mulvey speaks of, however, serve to generate an additional weight on the post-filmic hermeneutical task and in doing so prompts an even greater awareness of that task’s existence in and against history (even if the point of origin of that task is the relatively autonomous experience of aesthetic absorption in the movie theater). We can respond to this pressure not only by contemplating the experience of absorbing oneself into a film in a theater (or in an uninterrupted viewing at home), but also by literally freezing the frame of a moving image on a disc – if it has survived the digital compression process, of course – in order to interrogate it and thus, perhaps, revise one’s initial experience of it, and to open that judgment out onto the discourse of history. The dialogical nature at the heart of discourse about film in the digital age, then, is itself directly related to the fact that our experiences of cinema involve not only a perceptual component of discrete objects within particular historical spaces but also a complex hermeneutical one that exists across historical time, and it is in view of this double-sided nature of film experience that the first two chapters of this project posit an approach towards understanding how this experience might be of a philosophical nature.

This chapter and the next, through their interest in the historical time and space of film experience, thus form a propaedeutic to the analysis of Terrence Malick’s films undertaken in the final four chapters by fleshing out an approach that engages with these twin concepts of time and space which underpin any film experience (and all thinking about that experience). The approach I put forth within these pages will build upon Goodenough’s assertion, discussed in the previous chapter, that it is in the film
experience – phenomenologically, in both its spatial and temporal aspects – that we can begin to understand film functioning in dialogue with thinking. While my approach includes elements of the sociological, ontological, and illustrative approaches as discussed previously, it also seeks to move beyond them in order to suggest how dialogical film experience, as a historically situated and finite phenomenon, may function to produce philosophical meaning that is attuned to the processes of becoming depicted in Malick’s films, and the spectator’s own process of becoming as initiated through the complex dialogue initiated by the films. I conceive this dialogue to be a fundamentally historical one, one engaging both film and spectator as historically situated entities situated in space (the concrete experience of a film in a movie theater, for example, the kind of experience which is increasingly becoming part of the past in terms of projected 35mm film) but also complexly evolving in terms of time (which has as just one of its components the act of interpretation, which exists both after the film is over and within a historical tradition and situation which makes interpretation possible).

This chapter, then, will be primarily concerned with the notion of historical time, pointing to the emergence of time as an important concern within debates on the relationship between film and philosophy, particularly within the work of Deleuze, and suggesting that the creatively enabling historical situations of both the filmmaker and the critic tell us something about how a dialogue with film can occur. The chapter will suggest how the idea of “film as philosophy” as postulated by Goodenough might be extended into larger debates within cinema studies, including ones that circulate around the philosophical powers of the film image as discussed by Deleuze and the value of
interpretation. The shift to historicism in the late 1980s and 1990s in film studies was accompanied by a de-valuing of the act of interpretation, but the “film as philosophy” approach intervenes in this situation by suggesting ways in which a concern with history might be paired with the post-filmic act of writing film criticism, which in many instances involves the writing of interpretations. Following this concern with a writing about film that is both historical and critical, this chapter will then examine how Stanley Cavell’s concept of a film “automatism.” Cavell’s concept, I will argue, can help us construct a philosophically informed historical and critical poetics – indeed, can help us further understand what a “critical poetics” itself is and how it might function to augment the already familiar “historical poetics” as it has been used in film studies – that can further our comprehension of how and what the film medium and we as viewers become, following Rodowick’s phrasing, in the making and experiencing of films in and across time. The automatisms of a filmmaker, locatable via historical poetics, can tell us how films engage with the potential of the medium, how they build upon and realize themselves through an engagement with the traditions of past filmic practices, and thus how any engagement with the film medium is inherently an engagement with history. The other side to a historical poetics is what I will call a critical poetics, the concepts we bring to bear (from the history of film theory, criticism, and philosophy) upon the film experience, and which are themselves questioned and refigured in especially affective or revelatory experiences of films.

The next chapter will be initially more concerned with historical space, following Sobchack in her interest in showing how meaning is made by both the viewing subject
and the film itself, which Sobchack intriguingly invests with subjective qualities, in the experience of a film projection. At the same time, however, the third chapter keeps in mind the lessons of the second – that is, that what we refer to as the spatial qualities of film experience are themselves caught up with the temporal, that is, with historical change and with our acts of meaning-making. The third chapter’s focus on historical space and the discrete object of film is in every instance meant to ultimately give way to a deepened understanding of how that space opens out onto time. Celluloid not only presents images to us in the present that fade into the past as we look at them but also is an inherently entropic medium and is thus always finitely situated in the space in which it appears. We are more aware of this now than at perhaps any other moment in history. At both of these levels these two chapters are meant to inform and prepare us for an analysis of Malick’s work and the engagement with historical space and time that the films themselves enact.

The Power of Movies: Towards a Return to Interpretation

Part of the purpose of this chapter is to further our sense of how a hermeneutical engagement with cinema exists not only in a fixed moment in time (in a particular historical and contingent space) but rather also across time. When thinking of experiences of cinema, it is often convenient to begin thinking of a physical location or the kind of physical medium on which we experienced the film. These kinds of situations and objects have a certain kind of stability, and thus we can tether certain qualities of experience to them. But thinking through how film experience evolves in time is a
trickier matter. This involves asking what factors are involved in the evolution of a
meaning that is generated after the experience of a film. If we accept at the beginning that
this meaning occurs dialogically – that is, that in making meaning both film viewers and
the film itself enter a dialogic field that involves not only the experience of the film itself
but the other discourses which, in time, eventually inflect that experience – it is at least
implicitly admitted that both the viewer and the film have an equal, or at least each have a
substantial, share in the production of meaning.

To that end, I want to demonstrate that despite its apparent ontological instability,
the discrete object of film has certain powers that it asserts in this philosophical dialogue
with us, and that these powers impact the ways in which we hermeneutically engage with
the fictional worlds they envision. These powers do not outstrip our agency as viewers, as
one might argue via reference to Plato’s allegory of the cave (when applied to the case of
film viewing, Plato’s allegory suggests that films “dupe” unsuspecting viewers). Nor is
film’s power a kind of immortal power that puts us and the film in a position of visual
mastery; the power of film, as I conceive of it, is hardly an omniscient force. In this
section I will instead explore how the affective powers of certain kinds of filmmaking
have consequences for the ways in which we make meaning of the film experience. This
section will also suggest that the power of film cannot be fully grappled with through the
reigning paradigms of historicism within film studies, even if the historical paradigm
nonetheless offers something indispensable to this study. The “film as philosophy”
approach, which respects the power of movies and the meaning they themselves are able
to contribute in our dialogues with them, pressures us not only to understand how films
function to produce effects in particular historical contexts (as in the emphasis in recent
historiographical research on film style, for example) but also prompts us to realize that
meaning is not located entirely in the past, in the delineating of static functions and
effects that films have had and thus will continue to have. In other words, philosophical
cinema pressures us, despite all the thinking and research we have been doing, and
despite all the good work that has been done, to yet realize, to quote Heidegger, “that we
are still not thinking.” The best films perhaps orient us just as much towards the future
(in the interpretations that we might write, in the thinking that we still might have to do)
as in the past (in the historical research which suggests how things have been and should
continue to be).

When speaking of the “powers of movies,” we perhaps realize that the first
theorist of cinema (well avant la lettre) was Plato. Plato’s allegory of the cave suggests
that the power of the movies is one which fools us. Film theory was historically
predisposed to make this connection to the ancient philosopher, for as Ian Jarvie suggests,
the fact that Plato’s cave is “the most potent image of man’s epistemological and
ontological predicament in the whole of Western philosophical literature” might suggest
that film itself only exacerbates this predicament. In Plato’s allegory, as spoken by
Socrates, humans dwell in an underground cave, in which they have been placed since
childhood. With light coming from a fire burning behind them, they are chained in place
so that they can only see what is put in front of them: Shadows of various figures, as in a
puppet show. In the dialogue, Socrates and his interlocutor grapple with the idea that
these humans necessarily accept these shadows as reality, since they have known no other
existence. For them, illusion is truth; they have no agency with which to recognize that it is a truth produced by scheming illusionists. As such, they cannot, in any meaningful sense, engage in a meaningful experience of time: because they are so literally enchained to their illusory images, Plato’s spectators can never engage in a process of becoming; they can never become anything other than dupes trapped in a cave. They are not only trapped in space but also in time.

Richard Allen has suggested that post-classical film theory (at least as it was practiced in the 1970s and in much of the 1980s) reinscribes the allegory of the cave, this time in a marked suspicion towards the productions of mainstream Hollywood cinema (although functioning in large part as a suspicion of the cinema in total) and the ideological ramifications they have for the spectator’s experience.\(^\text{11}\) Steven Shaviro likewise suggests that this is in part because of the preference, in metaphysics, of “the verbal to the visual, the intelligible to the sensible, the text to the picture, and the rigorous articulations of signification to the ambiguities of untutored perception.”\(^\text{12}\) In this, theory’s suspicion of most films echoes Plato’s warnings against the potential negative effects of art, as Allen has written:

Plato considers that art is essentially illusory because, rather than being master of what we see, we are placed at the mercy of a point of view upon the world that is dictated to us by the artwork . . . The history of Western aesthetics . . . could be viewed as an attempt to rescue art from the debased position assigned it by Plato. This goal has been achieved by drawing an evaluative distinction between art and
mass culture. Mass culture is designated illusory, regressive, and sensational; high art is considered authentic, ennobling, and moving. Cultural studies has certainly complicated the picture set by Allen, given the field’s attention to issues of spectatorship which complicate the Platonic model. And as I attempted to show in the introduction, the decline of film as a medium has reminded us of the inherently transient nature of film itself, rendering us skeptical of any film (or theory of film) which would attribute to the medium immortal or transcendent powers. And yet Allen’s study was written only a decade ago, suggesting some of the influence of 1970s film theory still holds sway within the discipline, and indeed much critical theory of visual culture continues to suggest that spectators are always constructed by culture rather than dialogically engaged with it as rational agents.

The Platonic influence on much post-1968 film theory is more immediately relevant to a study of Terrence Malick’s films as such a project might fall into the trap of this dichotomy, positing Malick’s work (if not guilty of illusions itself) as the enlightened exception to the usual Hollywood detritus and as such more in line with the European modernism of Jean-Luc Godard, Alexander Kluge, and Michelangelo Antonioni, or the American independent cinema of John Cassavetes and Jim Jarmusch. Yet this is at best a sidestepping, and at worst an outright evasion. Malick’s films, although heavily influenced by these modernist traditions, and although resistant to the idea of the image as purely a vehicle for narrative information (an idea closely tethered to the standardization of classical cinema), at the same time also emerges from the aesthetic possibilities inherent in certain past Hollywood films. It is true that they often take these
possibilities as a point of departure, inflecting genre conventions sometimes to the point that they become largely unrecognizable, asking us to come to terms with how their new configurations put new pressures on our thinking. But Malick’s work cannot be separated from the history in and against which it emerges. His films, even as they themselves stem from the Hollywood tradition, suggest that the Platonic consideration of the power of movies is insufficient or even incorrect; the faith Malick’s films place in convention suggests that a dialogue – rather than an illusory monologue in which only the film’s illusions have force – can occur between film viewers and at least some films.

A model proposed by Gilles Deleuze offers one important component in a better path towards understanding the power of movies. Deleuze allows for an understanding of both the shortcomings of certain films and the pressure certain films place upon us to philosophize, to realize that, after the film is over, we still have quite a lot of thinking to do. His concepts speak directly to our concerns with the post-filmic act of interpretation, since for Deleuze cinema does not trap its spectators in the timeless environs of the cave, but rather animates them productively in an encouragement of philosophical becoming. To that end, Deleuze once asked: “What is having an idea in cinema?” Deleuze answers his own question in an illuminating fashion:

An idea – like the one who has the idea – is already dedicated to this or that domain. It is sometimes an idea in painting, sometimes an idea in fiction, sometimes an idea in philosophy, sometimes an idea in science. And it is certainly not the same thing that can have all that. Ideas must be treated as potentials that are already engaged in this or that mode of expression and inseparable from it, so
much so that I cannot say that I have an idea in general. According to the techniques that I know, I can have an idea in cinema, I can have an idea in a given domain, an idea in cinema or rather an idea in philosophy.14

For Deleuze, it is possible to have an idea in both philosophy and cinema. An idea for Deleuze is not a full-fledged concept: it is only potential, but potentials which may lead towards the creation of concepts in an engagement with a particular mode of expression. “The task of the philosophical idea is not to make something known,” D.N. Rodowick has written, “but rather to make known our powers of thought.”15 Ideas are potential because they only realize themselves in the working-out, the crafting, of material (whether this is the material of painting, of cinema, or of philosophy), material in turn forming new pressures on us to create concepts adequate to it. Ideas for Deleuze thus evoke the ancient idea of techné, the work of craft that emerges from tradition and the parameters of a given medium of expression, and that can be taught. (One way to understand this notion is to consider how innovative forms of creation generated, at least initially, through the fundamental basis of techné subsequently place pressure on techné, as a storehouse of concepts and methods, to further its own modes of teaching, to adapt to new forms just as ably as it is able to teach old ones).

But always this ability to craft ideas into concepts exists first as potential – again, as nothing more than an idea, and not quite a concept – as Heidegger has indicated in his suggestive comment on the deeper meaning of the act of the human hand, which reflects another way of thinking about how working-through ideas is a lot like craft:
Every motion of the hand in every one of its works carries itself through the element of thinking, every bearing of the hand bears itself in that element. All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking. Therefore, thinking itself is man’s simplest, and for that reason hardest, handiwork . . . We must learn thinking because our being able to think, and even be gifted for it, is still no guarantee that we are capable of thinking. To be capable, we must before all else incline toward what addresses itself to thought – and that is that which of itself gives food for thought. What gives us this gift, the gift of what must properly be thought about, is what we call most thought-provoking.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus the notion of the idea – as posited by Deleuze and, in my reading, inflected through Heidegger – suggests that thinking, and thus the provoking of thinking, is always waiting to happen in an experience of cinema. Cinema, in Deleuze, puts different kinds of pressure on our thinking, on the way we make and wield concepts (and, perhaps more often and more modestly, substantially inflect preexisting ones, existing as concepts do within their own dialogical tradition). As neither fully defined in a conservative sense by only past traditions (in which our concepts are already fully given to us) nor existing in an exclusive focus on the richness of a contingent moment, the creativity of the thinker, in its most profound sense, is perhaps only an adequate response to this pressure when it seeks to refigure the conceptual resources of the past through the refiguring power of present thinking. This notion points to the historical creativity of both thinking and cinema, wherein philosophy, according to Deleuze, “entails creating or even inventing
concepts” and wherein cinema involves the invention of “blocks of movement/duration. If one puts together a block of movements/duration, perhaps one does cinema.”

D.N. Rodowick, one of Deleuze’s best critics in cinema studies, has articulated the point this way:

To have an idea, then, is to express thought through particular constructions, combinations, or linkages – what Deleuze calls signs. As Spinoza insisted, signs are not an expression of thought, but rather of our powers of thinking. Ideas are not separable from an autonomous sequence or sequencing of ideas in thought, what Spinoza calls concatenatio. This concatenation of signs unites form and material, constituting thought as a spiritual automaton whose potential expresses our powers of thinking, action, or creation.

Thinking, in a sense, becomes more in tune with its powers of thought through an encounter with the linkages and constructions, the arrangement of “blocks of movement/duration” – the signs – that cinema generates. Signs for Deleuze do not point to already articulated meaning, but rather exist in a state of potential, as powerful forms that nonetheless do not quite have the power to articulate themselves (they call for thinking and articulation) and thus gesture towards a potential power not in the film but in the spectator’s reception of the film. It is not necessarily that cinema needs philosophy in order to become aware of its creativity, for the film medium’s creativity is ultimately of a different order than the creativity of the medium of thought. Rather, the creativity of filmmaking pressures thinking to respond in creative ways. It calls upon the viewer to engage with the hermeneutical pressures of film experience as they exist in time, to move
from the experience of an aesthetic object to a working-through of the meaning of that experience, a working-through that in the related processes of thinking and writing that responds to the history which enables it. This working-through has existed historically in the realm of film theory and film criticism; as Rodowick has suggested, in this light film theory and criticism should be read as not so much about cinema itself as it is “about the concepts created in the history of cinematic images…Deleuze reads the history of cinema as if it were a history of philosophy[.]”¹⁹ In this sense, film theory and criticism function as conceptual resources for philosophy (and thus, logically, philosophy for film theory). For Deleuze film theory is a working-through that exists in dialogue with particular films, a generation of concepts that takes up the call for thinking particular films demand through the construction of their signs. The special possibility of cinema is to both show thought (in the form of depictions of characters, for example, either working-through or failing to work-through thought in given historical and social situations) and to generate it (in the hermeneutical pressure enacted on viewers by the dialogical and innovative organization of film form and style). As Rodowick also writes, film “may be best able to picture thought and to call for thinking because like thought its ideas are comprised of movements, both spatial and temporal, characterized by connections and conjunctions of particular kinds.”²⁰

Not all films pressure, or indeed depict, thinking in the same ways, and in this sense Deleuze’s model offers additional paths towards understanding how the style of Malick’s films, as well as the narrative form and engagement with the experience of characters they offer, generate particular kinds of pressure on thinking. Deleuze has
fashioned two theoretical categories to articulate the kinds of hermeneutical pressure that films place on thinking spectators: the cinema of the *movement-image* and the cinema of the *time-image*. These concepts are of enormous use in following through on Goodenough’s desire to make philosophical sense of the film experience, for although Deleuze is not a phenomenological thinker, his ideas, as I will show, nonetheless can be seen to have a bearing on how we might consider our reflections upon the film experience. This entails not following Deleuze wholesale but rather deepening further the notion that philosophy, and thus Deleuze’s own ideas, can function as a vibrant storehouse of conceptual thought that might be animated in new ways in the future.

Each of Deleuze’s categories of film, as I understand them in this study, emphasize the particular kinds of pressures on the filmgoer during the experience of each, and in ways that pertain directly to narrative form and style (or, in Deleuze’s words, “blocks of movement/duration”) and character (much of Deleuze’s conceptual schema is at least tangentially concerned with the actions that characters take, or cannot take). Although Deleuze is not a film historian, his two categories of the image fall historically across a divide. The movement-image characterizes most films made prior to World War II, including the classical Hollywood cinema, French poetic realism, and Soviet montage. The time-image arises, for Deleuze, by the end of the second World War, and is first seen in the films of Italian neorealists and then the French New Wave. While historians have criticized Deleuze for mapping a philosophical system onto a historiography that is itself flawed (to some extent Deleuze relies upon a “developmental” notion of cinema art in which the movement-image at a certain point in history gives way to the time-image), his
concepts, as I will show, are nonetheless valid for an interrogation of the varying hermeneutical pressures film places on its viewers. Deleuze’s conceptual schemes hold up less as an index of historical fact and much more as a malleable critical map, one that does not so much rely on history as one that calls on us to think through how we engage in and with history – that is, how we respond to the different kinds of thinking the films typified by Deleuze’s two categories encourage us to undertake, and how our responses intersect with our understanding of the histories films depict and by which they are enabled.

The phrase *movement-image*, for Deleuze, delineates all those forms of cinema that conform to what he calls through his two *Cinema* books the “sensori-motor schema.” This schema is not natural in Deleuze, but is rather a culturally normative schema of perception, feeling, and action that is confirmed in the goal-oriented action of the classical cinema (and much social interaction). The movement-image is a transnational concept, bridging as it does the various national cinemas of the Soviet Union, France, Italy, and Germany prior to the second World War, in addition to the Hollywood industry. “The sensori-motor schema,” writes Ronald Bogue in his analysis of Deleuze’s thought, “provides the commonsense temporal and spatial coordinates of our everyday world, and the signs of the movement-image, which are the signs of classical cinema, ultimately conform to the coordinates of that commonsense world.” The *time-image*, meanwhile, refers to a body of films produced after the second World War that respond to various traumas and widespread social change with images that function as “new kinds of signs” in response to the breakdown of the sensori-motor schema.
To understand further the value of Deleuze’s categories of the movement-image and the time-image to a consideration of “film as philosophy” one must understand the central role of the *interval* in his thinking through of these categories, and how this relates to an understanding of both character action and the logical organization of cinematic form ("blocks of movement/duration"), and the affect the interval has on our experience of cinema. The interval denotes, on a basic level, a gap, one either effaced (in classical cinema) or brought forward to thought (in much modernist and post-classical cinema) through the edit or cut that joins two images of the world together in any given film. It can describe, as Steven Shaviro has suggested, a moment of shock, in which perception “is turned back upon the body of the perceiver, so that it affects and alters that body[.]”23 “Interval” also describes moments located before or after perceptions, actions, and feelings experienced by a character. In the classical Hollywood cinema, for example – the tradition in and against which Malick makes his films – self-reflexive emphasis on the interval (especially in its form as an element of cinematic technique, as an edit) is often elided in favor of emphasis on the goal-oriented actions of classical protagonists, which tend to “hide” the intervals or gaps that join images together. In effect, in the classical cinema of the movement-image we often do not notice the cut – the interval in time, in the joining of two times – and we often do not feel the effect of the shock because we are focused on the perceptions, desires, and especially the actions of characters against the background of a rationalized narrative, and the image acts as a vehicle for delivering us these. These perceptions, desires, and actions are depicted through an organization of cinematic imagery no longer enacting any overt pressure on our perception and thinking,
an organization that we have long since become attuned to as the norms of the classical cinema. As Gregory Flaxman has suggested, in the regime of the movement-image “the classical patterns of narrative cinema – for instance, all the mechanisms of continuity editing – emerge from our own habit of treating the cinema as an extension of our own perception.” The adjustment of our habits of perception to the norms of the classical movement-image, along with the narrative strategies of the classical cinema driven in large part by the goal-fulfillment of the characters in the stories, assure that our experiences of the films will move fluidly and consistently across three different types of intervals in the “movement-image”: the “perception-image,” “the affection-image,” and “the action-image.” We tend not to notice these intervals in an experience of the movement-image; our focus remains on the whole, the entire meaning of the narrative from which these particular images are given a larger significance.

The perception-image, for Deleuze, functions as a temporary horizon enabling subjectivity, a local background against which a subject may act at a certain moment in time. The perception image, in Paola Marrati’s reading, “incurves the universe around itself and gives a horizon to the world.” In the perception-image, the film character begins to extract a subjective perspective, one that does not wholly exist prior to the perception but is instead enabled by the perception. As Flaxman has written of Deleuze, “we cannot extract a subject from the universe of images as we might deduce it, in Kantian terms, from universal conditions. Rather, the subject is the extraction, the process of drawing order from this ‘chaos of light’ as if through a sieve.” The subject, having staked out a certain horizon of possibility, responds to this range of possibilities
inherent in any horizon with action (actions that work to further establish subjectivity),
given to cinema viewers in the action-image, in which viewers often see characters
respond to situations assuredly, in the pursuit of goals. “Where perception establishes a
center,” Rodowick writes, “it also establishes a horizon of action. In this temporal
interval, the subject judges simultaneously the virtual action that things may have on it
and the possible action, reaction, or response that will be appropriate.” The affection-
image, meanwhile, broadly refers to qualities of lived states – immediate situations in
which the perceptual focus is inflected by a certain feeling or affect, in response either to
a background perception or a performed action (affections may cause actions or may act
in response to them). As Rodowick has written: “Every film combines these three sorts of
images, just as our subjectivity is always a combination of three moments, although one
type may dominate.” In much standardized cinema, the action-image (with its emphasis
on character action) and the affection-image (with its emphasis on character emotion)
tend to dominate the construction of cinematic form; the perception-image in this regime
rarely acts autonomously, for it is often subordinated to the affection-image and the
action-image, which describe the meaning of the visual within the framework of a
narrative drive and the subjective, goal-oriented rationalization of character subjectivity.

Deleuze’s categories thus describe the organization of cinematic imagery, and
emphasize the ways this organization affects our perception of the actions of characters.
In our experience of a film that falls in Deleuze’s category of the time-image, the gaps in
time – either gaps that join images together or the gaps that emerge in the temporal
distance between a character feeling or perception and character action – tend to be
exacerbated, and because of this image and sound are no longer effaced as narrative
vehicles but begin to enact autonomously, as poetic pressures on our thinking. In key
postwar European films such as *Voyage to Italy* (1951), *Breathless* (1959), *L’Aventura*
(1960), and *Pierrot le fou* (1964) – all films that might be described, from our
contemporary theoretical perspective, as allegories of Deleuze’s time-image – we begin,
in other words, to notice the gaps, or the intervals in time, both in terms of discontinuous
editing strategies (that emphasize editing as a film technique become salient in the
phenomenological experience of film-watching) and in terms of gaps between character
perceptions, affections, and actions. Characters in the cinema of the time-image are thus
always in a perpetual state of becoming, as they are never able to confirm their
subjectivities in an action once and for all (thus the oft-noted “ambiguity” of the art
cinema that often troubles our sense of narrative closure), unlike the hero of a typical
Hollywood film, who tends to confirm subjectivity in the successful achievement of a
goal. Characters in the time-image perceive and are affected, but quite often these
feelings do not result in any sort of goal-directed action (witness the trademark ennui of
the films of Antonioni) or they result in either inadequate or irrational responses and
actions (witness the violent and ineffectual search for existential freedom conducted by
characters in many early Godard films, particularly Jean-Paul Belmondo in *Breathless*
and *Pierrot le fou*).

In the time-image, then, the interval always functions to have an affective and
altering effect; the interval jars the body into action, except that in the cinema of the time-
image action has become impossible, irrational, or ends in failure. A certain kind of
perceptive and affective pressure—what Deleuze calls a “purely optical and sound situation”—does not enable action, as in the classical cinema, but rather burdens the character with the self-conscious weight of existential possibility. “Purely optical and sound situations,” as Paolo Marrati has written, “surge up when links between actions are undone and when we, along with the character, are abandoned to what there is to see, to that which is too beautiful or too unbearable, not only in extreme situations but also in the smallest fragments of everyday life.”

Films made in the spirit of the time-image no longer show confidence in movement and action in the same way as the classical cinema, a lack of confidence that is exuded in the organization of the “blocks of movement/duration” encouraging a different kind of thinking, one no longer confirming our belief in the sensori-motor-schema in the same way as standardized forms of cinematic organization.

On one level, it is possible to see the cinema of the time-image as emerging “from a cultural sense of disorder and unpredictability,” yet there is a perhaps more optimistic side to the regime through the very fact that its new form of image organization “charges our perception of time with a receptivity to the multiple, the diverse, and the nonidentical.” The cinema of the time-image does not confirm the subjectivity of the classical hero and standardized logic of classical cinema, but is instead a cinema of the “seer,” where characters are seen perceiving and feeling more often than they are confidently and successfully acting upon those perceptions and affects. Imagery in the cinema of the time-image is also not subordinate to a mastering logic which asserts its meaning prior to our experience of it, for just as the characters of the time-image are
shocked and surprised by what they see, so are we. In both of these ways, Malick’s cinema, as we will see, functions in many respects within the regime of the time-image (although it also includes important traces of the movement-image which will be discussed shortly). Rather than confirm absolutely our faith in past forms of action which have proven effective (in the past), Malick and other cinemas of the time-image call for a new response, and movement of philosophy towards the future, as Rodowick has suggested: “Where the movement-image ideally conceives the relation between image and thought in the forms of identity and totality – an ever-expanding ontology – the time-image imagines the same relation as nonidentity: thought as a deterritorialized and nomadic becoming, a creative act.”\(^{31}\) It is in an experience of the innovative films of the time-image that we are pressured to think in particular ways that are not reducible to what has been thought-through before. In this the cinema of the time-image, for Deleuze, has powers that enable the powers of philosophy, since for Deleuze “philosophy must be converted from seeking out the eternal to analyzing what makes it possible for the new to appear,” otherwise known as “the condition of possibility.”\(^{32}\) In Malick’s work, the questions characters ask, the enigmas figured in the narratives, and our open-ended dialogue with these speak more to a “condition of possibility” than to the eternal confidence of action and movement on offer in the movement-image.

The impossibility of responding confidently to what is seen is a key trait of characters within a cinema of the time-image, then, and it is evident in different ways in Malick’s four films. In Badlands Holly’s lack of action – and the way in which she is carried along by the irrational actions of Kit – are attributable to her socioeconomic
situation, her gendered and thus passive role within the American action film (a condition Malick’s film would seem to actively reflect upon), and her general status as a fifteen-year old still in a very early stage of becoming, unable to fully understand the larger import of what she sees going on around her. In *Days of Heaven* images of nature frequently seem at odds with the logic of the capitalistic system represented by the Farmer, and the beautiful strangeness of much of this natural imagery is caused by a sense that humanity’s ways of doing and acting against this landscape are inimical to it. In *The Thin Red Line* the soldiers often find themselves not in the situation of a forward-charge to battle (the goal of the war remains opaque to each of them, and only occasionally articulated, by Welsh for example, who repeatedly suggests that “the whole fuckin’ thing’s about property”) but more often in what Dana Polan has described as “a space of floating, of meaningless violence that can come from anywhere, but also of the effect of just waiting, of living with non-action,” a sense of meaninglessness that Polan attributes to looking at World War II through a post-Vietnam perspective. And *The New World* explores the more radical situation of a culture meeting the existence of another one with no standardized, historical forms of interaction to frame their very uncertain encounter. Images of nature in *The New World* function here more openly than in *Days of Heaven*: in *The New World* the inherent open multiplicity of possible ways of communing with and in nature still exists (although the elegiac tone of much of the film suggests the barbarism of what is to come).

Deleuze’s concept of the time-image, beyond pointing to realms of experience within the films themselves, suggests how such a cinema might pressure thought to find
new ways. In relation to Malick’s cinema, it begins to suggest the implications of the
director’s depiction of the historical; these implications can be understood by associating
Deleuze’s idea of the time-image to Russian formalism’s account of defamiliarization.
Action in the standardized structures of the movement-image, as Deleuze discusses at
length at the end of *Cinema 1*, has become a cliché, partially because the sensori-motor-
schema has conditioned and structured our everyday norms of perception and action. This
does not mean, of course, that our everyday actions include the same feats of derring-do
by the protagonists of most Hollywood films, only that the general structure of the action
– whereby an action is the organic result, first, of a perception, then of an affective
response that leads to rationalized action – accounts also for our most banal and
frequently repeated everyday actions, in addition to our more amazing ones. In such a
structure perceptions and affections never quite stand out for themselves; they have, in
effect, become familiar because they have become so thoroughly part of the structure
containing them (a structure which Deleuze repeatedly refers to as the Whole).

Marrati has suggested that part of the reason why the cinema of the movement-
image becomes a cliché shortly after the decline of the classical Hollywood studio system
is precisely because World War II shook a belief in the effectiveness of certain forms of
individual and collective agency and action that are prized by various regimes of the
movement-image. (It is worth pausing to remember that for Deleuze Eisenstein is just as
much a part of the standardized movement-image as classical Hollywood filmmakers).
The cinema of the time-image, by contrast, sparks a new thought through something quite
similar to defamiliarization, that process whereby objects or figures represented in art are
torn from their everyday instrumental contexts and given a new quality. In Deleuze’s conception of cinema, defamiliarization can be said to occur in the time-image precisely because action is no longer privileged: The perception-image and the affection-image tend to function relatively autonomously, cleaved from any function as instruments of a narrative. Coming to terms with what is seen on the screen becomes fully the spectator’s (and the character’s) responsibility; its meaning is no longer guaranteed by the closure of the action-image (and thus the closure of a plot) which would confirm the meaning of everything which has come before (image is no longer strictly speaking a vehicle for a thoroughly rationalized narrative). In placing such emphasis on the perception-image and the affection-image in the cinema of the time-image, Deleuze – despite his break with phenomenology in certain respects – in a sense echoes Bazinian phenomenology, with its attendant focus on the power of the film camera’s “impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions[.]” Bazin and Deleuze both prize the neorealist cinema precisely because it does not subordinate the filmed object to the status of a vehicle for or background to narrative information and instrumental action. The filmed object begins to stake out its own autonomy in the cinema of the time-image, an autonomy in which the meaning attached to it remains open in the spectator’s (and the character’s) experience.

The cinema of the time-image, although often self-reflexive (the cinema Deleuze celebrates most passionately in the pages of the Cinema books is the high modernism of Godard, Antonioni, and Rohmer), does not fully abandon the empathetic engagement with character that is central to Goodenough’s conception of film as philosophy. In
another sense, our empathy with characters only grows more intimate in the cinema of the time-image, insofar as our uncertainty regarding objects and figures in the filmed world are shared with the character and insofar as these perceptions and feelings are never subordinated to an already articulated meaning. Our dialogues with Malick’s characters and their fictional worlds never close down after the film is over; no final meaning has arrived at the end of the film, and thus Deleuze’s concept of the time-image speaks to the necessary post-filmic and open-ended act of interpretation of these films. My close analysis, taken up in the final four chapters of this study, will thus pivot in part around a consideration of how Deleuze’s ideas offer a path towards understanding the complex formal and stylistic organization of Malick’s films, particularly the intriguing ways in which this director’s work bears the traces of both regimes of the image which Deleuze outlines.

The Historical Time-Image

It is worth pointing out for now that Deleuze’s concept of the time-image has further implications for reflection upon the historical film, the broad genre in which all of Malick’s films fit. The classical historical film (in both its Hollywood and Eisensteinian incarnations) conforms primarily to what Nietzsche once called “monumental history” (in which the actions of historical heroes are celebrated and monumentalized) and “antiquarian history” (which repudiates the focus on great figures in favor of historical minutiae), types of historiography in which the past becomes fully knowable, although in fundamentally different ways. Classical historical films made within the regime of the
movement-image reflect a confidence in the ability to recreate and thus to know history, whether this be the history of D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) or Eisenstein’s idealized recreation of the Soviet past in a film like *October* (1925). The historical film made within the regime of the time-image, however, is more in the tradition of Nietzsche’s “critical history,” in that it does not confirm history as a fully knowable whole in either monumental or antiquarian form. Instead, our creative participation in the production of historical knowledge is self-consciously emphasized. The time-image is more ready to admit that history – despite every attempt to preserve or recreate the past authentically – is always artificial and, further, always dependent on our creative powers of thought just as much, if not more, than the available artifacts of history which enable creative reconstruction.

As Philip Rosen has pointed out, the notion of a historical past available for complete preservation and reconstruction (and thus complete reconstitution) is already a fantasy, given that “such a perfect preservation would entail canceling the gap between present and past, so that the rationale for preservation would become nonsensical.” Rosen reads Bazinian realism (and thus implicitly, the cinema of the time-image) as historiographical insofar as it reveals the preservation of an authentic past as not an inherent property of the film image but rather as an obsession of a subject who watches film (and thus, as was suggested in the introduction, one of many available historical ontologies in the making of films). The subject’s knowledge of that history never attains a moment of perfect reconstitution but is rather always in a state of creative, open-ended becoming, and the cinema of the time-image (and Malick’s films in particular)
acknowledges this fact. Indeed, insofar as Malick’s films involve the recreation and reconstitution of the American past, they also house this preservation within a film form and style that demands the active thought of the spectator. In Malick, film’s relationship with American history takes much the same form as film’s relationship with philosophy, in that it becomes an open-ended question rather than a declarative statement. Thus, the inadequacies of the social structures and institutions of the past and the frustrated desires of the characters in relation to these, as represented in Malick’s work, are dealt with not only in terms of content but also in terms of a filmic form and style that attempts to create, in tandem with the films’ critical attitude towards history, a sense of other possible worlds that might be better than the one depicted in the drama. These are what Marrati has called in her reading of Deleuze’s concept of the time-image “other livable configurations of thought in images themselves,” configurations which challenge character as well as spectator to confront the world in its openness rather than subjugate it or attempt to master it (as occasionally Malick characters will unsuccessfully try) through the intentions of a wholly stable subjectivity.38

Deleuze’s insistence on the temporal act of thinking and becoming, and the creative response to the uncertainties posited by the discontinuous organization of movement in the cinema of the time-image, resonates with the “film as philosophy” approach I am advancing in this study, particularly in its insistence that history (both American history and the histories of the particular characters) is open to further contestation. That is, to my mind Deleuze does not offer a framework for the interpretations of films so much as a propaedeutic for philosophizing after our experience
of film. Claire Perkins has suggested that Deleuze’s thinking marks a shift away from phenomenology’s interest in the hermeneutical depth which a more conventional framework might signal. Yet I would suggest that Deleuze’s interest in the power of film nonetheless has implications for interpretive reflections upon film within a phenomenological perspective. As Perkins writes elsewhere in her article, “Deleuze strives to preserve the filmic as an energy which is unfettered by the staticity of the written word; to not allow the authoritative voice of theory to subsume that of the film.”

Even if – indeed because – Deleuze himself does not provide a framework which can simply be mechanically applied to films, his writing on film suggests how the dimensions of film experience – engendered by particular types of filmic organization which Deleuze has delimited in his categories of the movement-image and the time-image – can come to bear upon the thinking we produce in our post-filmic “re-viewing.”

Here it should thus also be noted that Deleuze, for all his enthusiasm for becoming in his emphasis on the time-image and the new pressures on thinking it generates, on another level also calls for something that is in another sense quite traditional: to embark on an act of preservation, to preserve the “filmic energy” we receive in the experience of watching a film in our re-viewing of those films. “Filmic energy,” although an admittedly vague term, is roughly synonymous with what I have been hitherto calling “hermeneutical pressure.” More simply stated, affective feelings and thoughts engendered in film experience are those feelings generated by logical constructions of cinematic form – what Deleuze calls “having an idea in cinema” – which in turn generate particular kinds of concepts and empathetic engagements with characters.
These can and should be preserved so that it can be effectively responded to in the re-viewing of film, in the acts of writing and thinking which occur after the film experience is over, those acts which perhaps are more conscious of their existence within a history and society that tends to be forgotten in the immediate experience of cinema in the movie theater. In this model the immersive experience one receives with the aesthetic object in the relatively autonomous space of the movie theater is not rejected, but rather becomes something we can tap into in order to respond to both film and, in Malick’s case, the meaning of the histories depicted in the films. In this way, the sense of re-viewing that we get from Deleuze has ramifications for the way one writes about film, and thus for the way one might also engage in a philosophical dialogue with film.

Deleuze echoes a call for close attention to the film experience appearing elsewhere in debates about the relation between philosophy and film, so that despite his anti-phenomneological bent, Deleuze in at least one sense becomes a (strange) bedfellow with phenomenology. Although Deleuze and Stanley Cavell are very different thinkers, there is an echo of Deleuze in Cavell’s following response to a question posed by Andrew Klevan about what it means for a film to think:

Maybe another way of opening this out – ‘avoid voicing a thought awaiting its voice’ – is that good films prompt mysterious thoughts and feelings in us, amorphous, latent thoughts and feelings, and this is one of their achievements. All the arts can do this, but film seems to have a particular talent for it, and is drawn to it. The films are not simply prompting clear thoughts in us, or even clear ambiguities. They encourage us to take notice of these feelings that have yet to be
voiced, which are ‘awaiting’ their ‘voice.’ They encourage us to keep a hold of
that sense, not to lose it, or forget it; to keep a hold of the murmurings, the
rumblings, that are the route into discovery, not simply the discovery in itself. In Deleuze’s and Cavell’s insistence on the temporal quality of our hermeneutical
engagement with films – that is, in our engagement with the film’s ideas, which create
certain feelings in us that “have yet to be voiced” – we become aware of the temporal
nature of film interpretation; to that end, hermeneutical reflection upon film exists not
only in the space of the theater but also in historical time, an idea that echoes the major
thesis postulated by the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, who argued that aesthetic
derience is always bound up within one’s own historical becoming and the larger
becoming of history itself. An engagement with a film’s ideas occurs not only in the
film experience but perhaps most profoundly across time, in an act of re-viewing films
that challenge our subjectivities, a hermeneutical act that makes use of the conceptual
powers to which an experience of cinema has given rise.

This engagement, furthermore, calls not only for our meaning-making powers of
interpretation, but also for evaluation, not in the market-driven form of film reviewing,
but rather a kind of evaluation of the film experience that is attentive to the viewer’s own
becoming in the watching and re-viewing of a film. Film studies has, in the last two or
three decades, been notoriously shy to mobilize explicit value judgments about what
makes a film great, but we may indeed think a film is great for reasons that have
important consequences for our thinking, and thus barring – as contemporary film studies
has been wont to do – the “impressions” of evaluative film criticism has consequences for
how we might explore the larger philosophical contours of the film experience. In other words, debates about which films are great films are more than just opinions. To evaluate what we have, as Rodowick has written, “valued qualitatively in the experience of contemplating [films], or indeed by what we ourselves become in watching films,” necessitates critical reflection upon the critic’s hermeneutical task as it exists in the flux and flow of history. \(^43\) In this respect our engagement with the film object in the relatively autonomous space of the movie theater opens out onto history in critical reflection which is oriented towards the future and other possible worlds. Writing film criticism is a means to explore this philosophical, and indeed ethical, dimension of the film experience, to reflect further on what we have valued in watching films.

In focusing so clearly on the viewer’s act of becoming, Deleuze, Cavell, and Rodowick are philosophers who echo the call within film studies for writing on film that would not simply subjugate the film experience to a method which preemptively determines all that will eventually be said about the film. Kristin Thompson, for example—a writer on film whose paradigm otherwise diverges sharply from that of Deleuze and Cavell—suggests that critical analysis of films in North American film studies in the 1970s and 1980s suffer from a tendency wherein “the choice of a film [to analyze] simply serves to confirm the method,” particularly in the psychoanalytic paradigm, wherein readings of films often confirm the method. \(^44\) Thompson points out that all too often preconceived “methods, applied simply for demonstrative purposes, often end by reducing the complexity of films…The result is that the critic,” although highlighting what is fascinating about his or her method, “makes films seem dull and unintriguing –
yet I take it that the critic’s task is, at least in part, to emphasize the intriguing aspects of films.” Indeed, Deleuze and Cavell do not encourage the construction of a method that confirms itself in an analysis of a film. These thinkers instead often implicitly echo (in an admittedly very different form) David Bordwell’s call for a “fine-grained” analysis of films (an idea we will return to in the next section when we discuss the concept of “historical poetics” as posited by Bordwell), an analysis which in some sense might give voice to the previously unvoiced feelings of film experience. Their arguments, when taken together, encourage an approach which pays due attention to both the narrative form and style of a film and the various ways in which form and style have meaningful effects on our powers of thinking within and about history.

Film’s Automatisms: The Potential of Historical Poetics

The “film as philosophy” approach I am advancing pays special attention to the act of interpreting and evaluating films and the temporal nature of these acts in terms of their response to the filmic in the post-filmic act of writing. In this respect, despite whatever affinities the approach may have with certain comments advanced by film scholars such as Thompson and Bordwell, it also diverges sharply from their approach in that it seeks to once again assert the validity of interpretation and evaluation within film studies. To that extent, it also intervenes in one of Bordwell’s own central tenets of scholarly practice: the paradigm of “historical poetics,” in which acts of interpretation are framed solely “within a broader historical inquiry” and acts of evaluation are displaced almost entirely.
Bordwell, in the late 1980s (and again in another collection in the late 1990s), called for a new paradigm of historical research and the displacement of what was then an over-emphasis on certain kinds of interpretations in the institution of film studies (particularly interpretations produced by the psychoanalytic paradigm and, later, interpretations produced by cultural studies’ attention to popular culture). These interpretations were often applications of methodologies of what Bordwell calls “Grand Theory,” the reigning paradigms of theory in film studies in the 1970s and 1980s that functioned as “doctrine-driven thinking [discouraging] a careful analysis of problems and issues.” For Bordwell, these problems and issues should emerge not from abstract theorization that attempts to explain every detail of film experience, but rather from a more local set of problems which “need carry no determining philosophical assumptions about subjectivity or culture, no univocal metaphysical or epistemological or political presumptions – in short, no commitment to Grand Theory.” Bordwell’s approach also rejects the theory that subjects are constructed by culture, preferring a model of rational agency in which human acts (for example, the acts of filmmakers as documented in primary research) may be explained via recourse to a historiographical reconstruction of those acts as they occurred in particular contexts of production.

To some extent this study holds onto the advances of Bordwell’s ideas, primarily its insistence that the acts of filmmakers may be better understood through historical investigation that explores the enabling conditions of a film’s production. Malick’s films also themselves have something of a historiographical impetus; they share Bordwell’s fascination with the past’s curious ability to touch off “a Brechtian surprise: not ‘How
like ourselves!’ but ‘Who would have imagined that they could believe this?’ These films are not only figured by history but also figure history, and to that extent the effects they produce have an impact on the meaning we make of them. Malick’s inclination towards historical representation and film realism – the occasional sense the viewer receives from his films that pastness, however artificial, has been reconstituted in the film image – suggests a Bazinian inclination towards preservation of what has come before. At the same time, however, these films, in their intermittent tendency towards nonnormative editing patterns, gesture towards as yet unarticulated concepts and as such evoke the aims of speculative theory as much as historiography. The films, in other words, gesture as much towards the future post-filmic act of interpretation as they do towards the past. And while it is valuable to hold onto Bordwell’s theory of rational agency, a crucial aspect of his historical poetics, it is equally valuable to question the extent to which he often asserts such agency as a cultural given, especially since an empathetic engagement with Malick’s characters, as we will see, often suggests that in various social and historical contexts human beings encounter grounds which are not so enabling and in which institutionalized, abstract, and perhaps too conveniently comforting theories of rational agency tend to meet with the often brutal and unjust conditions of certain forms of human existence and embodiment.

And as I hope to show in this section, I do not reject Bordwell’s call for “a broader historical inquiry” into the cultural and industrial contexts which mark the production of Malick’s films; that is, I will make use of historical poetics, on one level, in order to explore some of the enabling conditions of Malick’s creativity in relation to each
film throughout this study. At the same time, however, this project’s interest in historiography intends to shift the focus on exactly what is being historiographically charted. In other words, I will be interested in more than a historiography of “those processes that enable films to come into being,” as Bordwell has characterized his historiography; I am interested equally and ultimately more in what I should like to call a historiography of the powers of film to enable thought. Malick’s films function as one privileged locus on such a historical grid, in which our primary interest in the films’ place in history is not so much in the aesthetic effects engendered by the films only in their original production contexts, but also the powers of thought which those films engender across time. These powers are relative to the powers of thought generated by other films and other artworks which find themselves in the same historical lineage as Malick’s work, but they cannot be limited to that lineage in their specificity. To this end, Deleuze’s concepts are particularly useful, for although Deleuze – and his critics – claim otherwise, to some extent his work does form a history, for it seeks to chart the various powers of thought which particular films have within and across particular historical moments.

Stanley Cavell’s concept of the film “automatism” offers a useful tool for this intervention which seeks a historical poetics of film’s powers of thought, in that it holds onto the valuable insights of the historiographical project Bordwell advances while at the same time questioning that project’s confidence in the stability of the film object and its assertion that what we are charting when we look at films historically are the literal functions they achieve through a series of formal cues. In following upon my interest to chart the powers of thought which films express, I also attempt to extend our notion of a
poetics to also include a “critical poetics,” that is, a reflection not only on what powers of thought are enabled at particular moments in the historical past but also how the powers of film enable us to think through the films, through the act of film criticism and evaluation, as we move towards the future.

This extension of the concept of “historical poetics” to include a corresponding “critical poetics” is made in order to suggest the importance of interpretation and evaluation to modes of thinking in addition to and other than historiography. In Bordwell’s model, interpretations of films should ideally function to tell us what kinds of effects films have on spectators on certain moments in history – that is, what kinds of cognitive processes certain kinds of film form and style cue at certain moments in history. These effects are limned in a study which focuses on what Rodowick has called “filmic comprehension as grounded in empirically delimitable mental and perceptual structures” – in other words, rather than functioning to generate meaning that might function beyond the ways in which it interacts with forms of filmic comprehension that already exist historically, historical poetics seeks only to point out those effects and the structures by which we comprehend them. Bordwell’s historical poetics and its theory of rational agency functions according to a theory of causality, which explains how subjects act the way they do (i.e., how filmmakers make films at particular moments in history, and how these films have delimitable effects). Rodowick, however, asserts that “human behavior and action . . . is ill served by causal explanation, for agents have the capacity to justify their behaviors with reason.” That is, although historical poetics is in a strong position to explain how human agents do what they do at certain moments in
history – how their acts are enabled by the ground against which they live and work – its model of causality falls short when attempting to explore why human agents do what they do, particularly why we as viewers even watch films in the first place (beyond Bordwell’s emphasis on films ask us to execute the rather basic operations of cognitive “cues” in order to understand narrative, the delineation of which serves to project an image of coherency onto the inherently pluralistic interdisciplinarity of film studies but does not really speak to the desire for encounters with cinematic objects that many of us bring into the theater). For Rodowick, then, film studies would do well to buttress historical investigation with “internal or self-investigation” in order to contemplate further how film has pressured thought in particular ways and at particular times, and indeed to suggest how filmmaking is itself a form of idea-making that places curious pressures on our powers of conceptualization and those powers’ engagements with history.

It is here that Cavell’s concept of the automatism – as reread in Rodowick’s own recent work and woven into the present study – offers a highly useful path towards understanding how the familiar paradigm of historical poetics within film studies might be further accompanied, and perhaps substantially refigured, through shifting its focus to the powers of thought which film expresses (rather than contextual aesthetic effects and functions) and partnering it with an approach to thinking and writing about film which I call a “critical poetics.” A critical poetics – as I outline it in the balance of this chapter and the next and as I practice it in the four chapters on Malick’s films which appear later in this study – is not meant simply to reinscribe the act of film evaluation, as it was practiced in the 1960s and 1970s, in contemporary film studies. That form of film
criticism, whatever its merits (in both its academic and journalistic guises), was tethered in large part to its historical moment in a way that cannot be quite reduplicated in the present (even if we can recreate certain of its operations, as academic film studies has historically done). Rather, “critical poetics” can serve as a malleable map we can use to mobilize our re-viewing of films – our interpretations and evaluations of films – in the post-filmic experience. In addition to using a historical poetics to chart the various powers of thought which film expresses at and in relation to particular moments in history, we can use a critical poetics to explore further how we as viewers and indeed film itself engage with these powers in an act of becoming and change across time.

Before exploring Cavell’s ideas and their relevance to this study, it is worth embarking first on a brief history of the word “automatism” in film studies (a history itself forming the outline of what a historiography of the powers of film to express thought might look like). The word “automatism” conjures notions of Surrealism and its emphasis on the unconscious, automatic act of the artist’s hand. Initially the word was tied more closely to the 1920s avant-garde movement in France known as Impressionism, in which the automatism functioned as a means to explore the transformative powers of film to which the mainstream French film industry was not sufficiently attentive. For the Impressionists, the film camera has the automatic ability to capture and record objects in the world, and to bestow upon them – via their inscription on the material substance of moving photographic celluloid – a kind of quality no other medium could quite accomplish. This was located in the nearly mystical concept of photogénie. Rene Clair, for his part, stressed the importance of automatism when he wrote that “There is no detail
of reality which is not immediately extended [in the cinema] into the domain of the wondrous,” and Louis Aragon waxed poetic about low-budget Hollywood films which nonetheless managed “to raise to a dramatic level a banknote on which our attention is riveted…a handkerchief that reveals a crime…a typewriter that’s the horizon of the desk…” The word *photogénie* was initially used (most famously by Jean Epstein) to describe how everyday objects became extraordinary through the cinematic apparatus; at its broadest level the word referred to the film medium’s specificity, its ability to take the “machine aesthetic” (first apparent in the medium of photography) further via the incorporation of recorded motion. Further, Viva Paci has suggested that the concept of *photogénie* forms an intellectual bedfellow with Benjamin’s concept of the “optical unconscious,” insofar as both function to shift our attention to the revelation of “certain aspects of the model in reality which are inaccessible to the naked eye and can only be seen with the help of an adjustable lens.” As with Bazin’s later suggestion that the cinema presents an image sheathed of our preconceptions, and reminding us of Deleuze’s idea of the effects of the time-image, these early theorists were fascinated by the shock to thought which cinema had the inherent potential to generate not through plot or even character but through the texture of celluloid and the effects of this texture on the filmed objects and figures.

Epstein, Clair, and Aragon, like many early thinkers on the cinema, were mostly interested in delineating the medium’s essence: those specific things that the medium of cinema, as a material substance, could do that no other medium could accomplish.

Medium specificity is here not simply engaged with a search for ontology, but it is also
profundely tied up with the act of evaluation, as Noël Carroll suggests when he writes that for classical theorists “a film qualifies as a work of film art . . . by the artist engaging the distinctive features of the film medium” as outlined by a particular theorist searching for theoretical definitions of specificity; the films valued by the theorists who mobilized the concept of photogénie in their writings are films which corresponded successfully to categories of film art for the Impressionists, and thus were deemed successful works of cinematic art. It should be pointed out that this act of evaluation is much more complex than this, for Carroll does not limn the content which underpins Epstein’s fascination with photogénie; after all, Epstein defined the concept as “any aspect of things, beings, or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction.” For Epstein, evaluation was not only concerned with the artist’s faithfulness to the “purely filmic” but also with the way the filmic could refigure one’s relationship with objects and the filmed character, an important insight for film evaluation that was, admittedly, not developed in any full sense in Epstein’s writing. Contemporary cinema studies has moved away the type of fascination the Impressionists had for cinema, a sobering turn marked most prominently in Carroll’s work, in which we are called upon to stop worrying about the materiality of the medium and to pay more attention to the moving-image as such, whatever form it takes (whether that be cinema, television, or computer imagery). Rather than worry about the efficient means with which a filmmaker conforms to the essential possibilities of his or her mediums, what makes film (and all art) fascinating for Carroll are effects, and ones which do not necessarily conform to abstract notions of medium specificity advances in early film theory.
But in Carroll’s work this warning against attempting to define the specific traits of a medium – and thus attempting to craft the yardstick against which all acts of film creativity should be evaluated – comes with a more general warning to stop investigating the nature of the medium altogether. As D.N. Rodowick has written in a partially sympathetic assessment of Carroll’s argument against notions of medium specificity, “it should still be possible to invoke the concept of a medium in ways that are not reducible to arguments concerning essence, teleology, and injunction. Much can be said about medium specificity that is nuanced historically and without legislating what artists should or should not do.”

Rodowick states explicitly that a fascination with medium specificity – and in this way he implicitly invokes the manner in which the ethical is tied in with the medium in Epstein’s thinking – can be more profoundly related to our contingent processes of becoming in time as we watch and most especially as we reflect upon films, with our engagement with the past as well as with our future possibilities, writing that the “self-identity of a medium may accord less with a homogenous substance than with a set of component properties or conceptual options.”

Further, a medium is also that which mediates – it stands between us and the world as representation (Vorstellung), or it confounds us in a way that returns our perceptions to us in the form of thoughtfulness. We need to go beyond a formal definition and try to understand how a medium inspires or provokes sensual, that is to say, aesthetic experience. A medium is not simply a passive material or substance; it is equally form, concept, or idea. Or, more provocatively, a medium
is a terrain where works of art establish their modes of existence, and pose questions of existence to us.\textsuperscript{62}

Here Rodowick moves towards a notion of film as a medium not figured around any essential possibilities “inherent” in its materials, but rather calls for studies which situate the film medium as “a set of component properties and conceptual options,” or, as I would put it, a storehouse of particular powers of “having ideas in film” that have historically marked film practice. This should recall not only the discussion of Deleuze’s paradigm in the previous section, but also the discussion of both Bazinian and Eisensteinian ontologies of film in the first chapter, and the idea that each of these classical theories function historically rather than essentially, as a mobilizing and enabling idea for film and critical practice. We recognize a medium only after it has passed through us (after the experience). This is a particularly important notion for an exploration of relationships between philosophy and the film experience, for it calls attention once again to the idea that the film medium, like any medium, is ultimately not wholly “defined” by its materials – even if these cannot be ignored in any study which wants to take seriously the notion of contingent, rather than universal, aesthetic experience – but rather by the concepts emerging in and across time from our experience of those historical materials constituting the medium. In this Rodowick echoes Stanley Cavell’s notion that “it is only in films – and in the evolving criticism of films – that you care about, that the medium reveals itself[.\textsuperscript{63}]

It is through this inflection of the familiar word “medium” that Cavell’s concept of the automatism becomes particularly useful, for it allows us to limn the varying ways –
in the form of particular films, genres, or arrangements of “blocks of movement/duration” at different moments in history – in which a medium places pressure on our thinking. The automatism may begin as photogénie (after all, the fascination with medium specificity finds one important origin in the work of the Impressionists), but through repeated use this once historically novel “discovery” becomes – or, more accurately, eventually reveals itself to be – a convention, as particular formations of the powers of cinema to express thought become more familiar. A convention can even lead us to recognize what was first considered medium-specific as a property that might in fact mark a discrete relationship between media (photogénie reminds us that photography itself, a distinct but related medium, might have a similar special property, even if it is of course not without its difference), yet – and this is important – without relinquishing or leveling out the mark the medium’s irreducible materiality left on us in a contingent moment of spectatorship. The medium thus reveals through or against the conventions of both film and critical practice; a “revelation” can only take place relative to other forms of artistic practice and critical knowledge. The intensity of this revelation might at first be so novel that it leads us to recognize it as a specific property; but more likely, it is a convention which can be wielded in ways that ultimately have less to do with the inherent properties of a single material substance. Cavell speaks eloquently on the subject:

I characterized the task of the modern artist as one of creating not a new instance of his art but a new medium in it. One might think of this as the task of establishing a new automatism. The use of the word seems right to me for both the broad genres or forms in which an art organizes itself (e.g., the fugue, the
dance form, blues) and those local events or topoi around which a genre precipitates itself (e.g., modulations, inversion, cadences). In calling such things automatisms, I do not mean that they automatically ensure artistic success or depth, but that in mastering a tradition one masters a range of automatisms upon which the tradition maintains itself, and in deploying them one’s work is assured of a place in that tradition.64

Automatisms can be taught (they can be the product of techné), they can be absorbed through one’s participation in culture, and they can perhaps even be created in the act of criticism, which may become more aware of an automatism’s existence than the creators themselves, who have perhaps acted, in part, unconsciously, or were perhaps attending to something else while the camera engendered its own automatism. (Recall that the Impressionists, in their theoretical writing, first saw photogénie in the films of American craftsmen who by all accounts were not terribly inclined to speculate theoretically about the action and adventure films they were making). They can be either thoroughly thought-through (the convention of tradition can be employed to open out onto new possibilities, inventions, and meanings) or they can be passively accepted (recall Deleuze’s notion, which we will revisit in looking at Badlands, that in certain 1970s American films the time-image reveals the movement-image to be a lazy cliché).65

When tethered to the word “automatism” – and its etymological association with the philosophical concept “spiritual automaton,” Spinoza’s phrase for the combination of signs which express our powers of thinking – the word “convention” can be potentially sheared of its negative connotation (which views it as synonymous with the word
“cliché” in all instances, as inferior to the work of geniuses who operate outside the bounds of historical convention). Our “automatic” ways of doing and making, of acting in and against culture, call upon tradition in ways that are not always fully open to view but are always already there; self-reflexively reflecting upon these ways of doing and making can lead to innovation and creation. The work of innovation and creation is something which shines through in our empathetic engagement with Malick’s characters, although the failure of their work is most often emphasized. In *The New World*, for example, when the European Captain John Smith absconds with the unnamed Native American girl we recognize as a figure we want to call “Pocahontas,” even if the film never names her that, he begins to craft – partially through the automatisms of his European heritage but also through the local knowledge of the Native-Americans which he to some extent learns – his own tragically temporary version of a new world. This act almost leads to revolution, or a humane synthesis of traditions. The failure of Smith and the larger failure of the colonial project in general throws Malick’s own successful wielding of automatisms into relief. This does not necessarily mean that Malick (or any filmmaker) is a genius acting outside of history, for at heart the concept of the automatism suggests that “the singularity of each creative act [would not] be recognizable and comprehensible without a basis for understanding the encounters between automatism and artistic will,” and surely automatisms cannot be wielded or advanced without, in the context of industrial film production at least, a massive collective effort. The creative automatism – of either individual or group, in whatever medium – occurs not out of the ether, but rather rebounds within tradition, and this is part, as the earlier
Mulvey quote suggested, of the weight history puts upon the hermeneutical act which comes after the absorption in film experience. The discourses of history and of production context bear down upon the film experience, after it is over, in the form of contemplating creative automatisms in the act of a philosophically informed criticism, and in such an understanding “artistic activity consists not in discovering the essence of a medium, but rather in exploring and perhaps renewing or even reinventing its powers of expression.”

By reinventing powers of expression, creators who wield automatisms in new and inventive ways enact new pressures on our thinking. These powers of expression, as the preceding section hopefully made clear, do not function as means of self-expression, as they might in a rather straightforward communicative model of art, but rather as the powers of cinema to express ideas, or in other words, chains of signs that might generate concepts in the spectator. As Cavell shows, film’s automatisms amount to much more than simply turning on the camera. The chapter titles of his book The World Viewed – “sights and sounds,” “photograph and screen,” “audience, actor, and star,” “types; cycles as genres” – speak to a variety of conventions within the practice of making and viewing films that may be bracketed under the term “automatism.” In tracing out these powers of expression and their emergence in particular moments in film history, a philosophically refigured historical poetics cannot help but trace the contours of how we think when we engage with film. This is why we can continue to map Deleuze’s and Cavell’s philosophical concepts onto emerging historiographical paradigms; philosophy and historiography can function in a dialectic, wherein the advancement of one necessarily
inflects and potentially refigures the other. As such it remains an indispensable tool for any project wanting to understand film functioning philosophically and understanding this function within history.

But the banishment of interpretation and evaluation from the practice of contemporary film historiography suggests historical poetics also requires a self-reflexively developed “critical poetics” to dialogue more fully with the powers of expression contained within the chains of signs in films, powers which historiography, in its attention to particular manifestations of film form and style at certain moments in film history, can only map. A critical poetics is the site in which philosophical meaning in an engagement with cinema can ultimately be made, for it is in a critical poetics that we can begin to reflect upon the implications of what we have valued in watching films unfold. In this sense, a critical poetics speaks to our experience in historical time, but unlike historical poetics – which remains primarily tethered to a desire to reconstitute the historical past, as in the traditions of monumental or antiquarian history – critical poetics, like the tradition of critical history, is oriented towards the future, towards what we as viewers may become in our engagement with a film’s ideas.

Thus, my study necessitates attention to what happens not only across historical time, outside the four walls of the film theater, but also in the historical space of those four walls, especially at a historical moment in which film’s inherent (because entropic) fragility as a medium is especially salient. In advance of further reflection upon the dimensions of a philosophically informed film criticism, then, a focus on the nature of
dialogical, phenomenological film experience in historical space will be the primary subject of the next chapter.


5 D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 22.

6 I say “in at least one sense” because, of course, the film print need not contain images which are made via a film camera; exhibited 35mm film prints may also include imagery produced by digital means (or hybrid means constituting both the digital and the filmic).


16 Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 17.
Gilles Deleuze, “Philosophy of Film as the Creation of Concepts,” 34.

D.N. Rodowick, “An Elegy for Theory,” in October 122 (Fall 2007), 102-103.

D.N. Rodowick, Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine, 172.


At the beginning of his Cinema 1 book, Deleuze asserts that his work is not primarily in the field of historiography. See Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 1, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), ix. David Bordwell is one of the historians who critiques Deleuze for mapping a philosophy of the cinema on an outdated historiographical paradigm. See Bordwell, On the History of Film Style (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 117.


Steven Shaviro, The Cinematic Body, 50.

Gregory Flaxman, “Cinema Year Zero,” in The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 96.

Paolo Marrati, Gilles Deleuze: Cinema and Philosophy (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 34.

Gregory Flaxman, “Cinema Year Zero,” 93.

D.N. Rodowick, Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine, 37.

D.N. Rodowick, Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine, 37.

Paolo Marrati, Gilles Deleuze: Cinema and Philosophy, 61.

D.N. Rodowick, Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine, 16.

D.N. Rodowick, Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine, 17.

Paolo Marrati, Gilles Deleuze: Cinema and Philosophy, 14.


Nietzsche’s three concepts of history and their relevance to the study of the historical film are studied at greater length in Marcia Landy, “Introduction,” in The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media, ed. Marcia Landy (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 3.


38 Paolo Marrati, *Gilles Deleuze: Cinema and Philosophy*, 79.


40 Claire Perkins, “Cinephilia and Monstrosity.”

41 Stanley Cavell and Andrew Klevan, “‘What Becomes of Thinking on Film?’: Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Andrew Klevan,” in *Film as Philosophy: Essays in Cinema After Wittgenstein and Cavell* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 193.


43 D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 23.


49 David Bordwell, “Film Studies and Grand Theory,” 29.


Noël Carroll, The Philosophy of Motion Pictures, 50.

D.N. Rodowick, The Virtual Life of Film, 41.

D.N. Rodowick, The Virtual Life of Film, 41.

D.N. Rodowick, The Virtual Life of Film, 42.

Stanley Cavell and Andrew Klevan, “‘What Becomes of Thinking on Film?’: Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Andrew Klevan,” in Film as Philosophy, 195.


Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 1: The Movement-Image (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 210-211.

D.N. Rodowick, The Virtual Life of Film, 45.

D.N. Rodowick, The Virtual Life of Film, 43.

D.N. Rodowick, The Virtual Life of Film, 45.
CHAPTER THREE: MALICK AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF EXPERIENCE

…if philosophy is in harmony with the cinema, if thought and technical effort are headed in the same direction, it is because the philosopher and the movie-maker share a certain way of being, a certain view of the world…

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Malick’s Characters, the Thickness of Experience, and the Fate of Structure

The first two chapters of this project have sought to situate, more self-consciously and theoretically than previous work has done, a propadeutic to a discussion of Malick’s cinema within larger debates regarding relationships between philosophy and the film medium. While the sociological, ontological, and illustrative approaches are useful in approaching a philosophical encounter with Malick’s work, by themselves they are hardly sufficient because they do not speak fully enough to what film itself contributes in dialogue with the spectator. This perceived lack in the historically available methodologies of associating the practice of philosophy with the phenomenon of films has motivated one of my central arguments thus far: that the film medium’s potential to express the powers of thought allows us not only to think about or of the film medium but also rather through it. Thinking through cinema means to engage with the medium of film not in order to master our experiences of style or content through an all-encompassing system or methodology, nor to define once and for all the timeless ontology of all cinema, but rather to harness this historically contingent and finite specificity, as it manifests itself in the creation, viewing, and critique of particular films at particular historical moments, as a companion in our generation of concepts. Work which wants to think through and with – rather than only of – the medium allows us also
to recognize that a potential philosophical historiography of film is not only or primarily a historiography of functions and effects in particular historical contexts, but also a historiography of film’s automatisms, film’s means to express the powers of thought within and across moments in time. The lineage of filmmakers, writers, and artists who have influenced Malick, and the institutional context of post-classical Hollywood cinema in which he has produced his films become, in this model, rich resources for aesthetic ideas that emerge from past historical and social contexts and speak to present ones. An aesthetic idea, as such, cannot simply be located at only one moment in history. Film invites our thinking through its expression of the powers of thought, gesturing always beyond the four walls of the film’s first projection towards the future reception in the minds of spectators who always might watch it and engage with it in unpredictable ways. As Mikhail Bakhtin once wrote, “every meaning will have its homecoming festival,” and film’s ideas are no different.

But what is the power of film itself – or, more precisely, the power of film not only as we consider it in the post-filmic act of writing about film but also in our present-tense viewings of the historical medium of film? Differentiating these two phenomena, is of course, tricky, for all thinking and writing about our “present-tense” film experiences ultimately occurs in the post-filmic act of thinking and writing about film. But the distinction is still valuable, I think, for a focus on film experience complements the previous chapter’s focus on historical time with an equally important focus on our experiences within historical space. Answering this question will also necessitate a focus on our encounters with the characters in Malick’s narratives, who are in many ways our
first point of entry into our experience and understanding of Malick’s fictionalized
historical worlds. In many ways, then, my present discussion of filmic space will intersect
with the first chapter’s concern with the hermeneutical pressure the filmic places on our
thought and our becomings. The first chapter has explored the power of film and its effect
on thought via recourse to certain concepts which enable our post-filmic thinking through
of the films we have seen. There this study was primarily concerned with the way films
pressure our thought to generate concepts across time and in relation to history. Although
the philosopher himself does not fully historicize his ideas, Deleuze’s categories of “the
movement-image” and “the time-image” remain dynamic concepts that direct our
attention to the ways in which the various organizations of images and sounds emerging
from different types of film practice place different kinds of pressure on our thinking.
Deleuze’s concepts can thus be fleshed out through a more specific focus on both
particular filmic practices such as Malick’s and our experiences of those practices. A
consideration of Malick’s films at greater length in both this chapter and the ones to
follow will show that his films incorporate aspects of both the movement-image and the
time-image.

The narrative structures of his films, emphasizing the forward movement of
history and the heavily foreshadowed ends some characters meet, recall Deleuze’s
concept of the movement-image, in which cycles of perception, affection, and action
eventually culminate not only in a finished whole but a finished whole that emphasizes,
in a sense, the closure of a particular moment in history. Yet Malick’s films only fit the
paradigm of the “movement image” when they are broadly and rather abstractly
described as historical narratives that, like works of historiography, set certain normative parameters around their storytelling in the forms of beginnings, ends, causes, and effects. In *experiencing* these stories we realize that, despite the forward progression of the narratives and their culmination, on an abstract level, in a certain teleological fulfillment, traces of other ways of being, perceiving, feeling, and acting have been significantly marked through our engagement with Malick’s characters, who pose questions that more often than not significantly destabilize our sense of the film as a finished whole. Our engagements with their experiences and the fictional worlds in which they live are the site of other ways of thinking and being that the forward movements of traditional historical narratives sometimes efface (or outwardly oppress). The questions these characters ask of their world remain with us even as the narratives reach their foretold conclusion, throwing a question mark around ostensible narrative closure and pressuring us to make sense of those perceptions and affections which have not been fully explained by the culmination of the narrative telos. In other words, Malick’s films at once outline, in their narrative structures, the telos which will inevitably characterize attempts at preservation within any linear historiography or historical narrative (regardless of the ambiguities and uncertainties which may appear along the way), and the contingent experiences of characters whose lives are testaments to others ways of becoming and perceiving the world – testaments which in turn challenge us to think through more carefully how Malick asks us to engage with the historical past of America which his narratives structure and represent.
The focus in this chapter is on the filmic, that is, on the phenomenology of film experience and the presence of perception, affection, and action as they are manifest within the experiences of Malick’s characters in and against the historical spaces in which they live. Before expanding upon this chapter’s focus, I should make it clear from the outset that while Deleuze has a reputation as an antiphilomenological thinker, his ideas are not ultimately incompatible with phenomenology as it has figured in the recent history of film studies. As Laura U. Marks has pointed out in her study on film phenomenology, “Deleuze doubted the usefulness of phenomenology to understand perception, arguing, to state it simply, that phenomenology privileges consciousness over the world…whereas for Bergson (and Deleuze) consciousness and the world, that is, the image, are indistinguishable.”

For Deleuze, consciousness is not primarily of the world (as in phenomenology, which privileges the subject’s experience of a particular object) but is rather in it, a field of energy that is, at least potentially, affected by and affects everything else in a kind of circuit. Deleuze rejects the stability of the subject, instead emphasizing, as D.N. Rodowick has suggested, the manner in which “subjectivity is becoming, change, deterritorialization, repetition becoming difference, the singular becoming multiple. Reactionary thought wants to bolster the ego against the forces of change, to anchor it in a true, good, and changeless world; it exhausts life by freezing identity.”

But as Marks goes on to discuss, despite the philosopher’s emphasis on how film viewers are pressured to think differently and expand their subjectivities through an encounter with the time-image, Deleuze offers no theory of spectatorship in his
philosophy. That is, in critiquing the theory of the subject in order to build his philosophy of becoming, he prevents his philosophy from developing any theory of the subject (no matter how provisional or tentative such a subject may be) who becomes. Who is the subject that perceives and is affected by cinema in Deleuze’s philosophy? Who is the subject challenged to become through an experience of cinema? For Marks, the value of film phenomenology in relation to Deleuze is that it provides us with a complementary model of film experience that privileges space but is not blind to the becoming of the subject across time. As we will see, in Sobchack’s theory experiences of filmic space are precisely what enable the creative becoming of the subject engaged with film. Film phenomenology’s experiencing subject is (temporarily) situated in space but becomes through time.

But we are concerned not only with the engagement with space that phenomenology has traditionally explored in relation to the subject’s experience in the film theater, but also with the acts of perception within the historical spaces of Malick’s films. These spaces can be brought to light through our consideration of the empathetic engagements we hold with his characters and our understanding of the filmmaker’s creation of the fictional worlds in which those characters are housed. And yet even in considering these acts of perception in space, the thought of time – and thus the Deleuzian process of becoming in and through time – is not far away. The “death of cinema,” the inherent, gradual entropy of any film print and the more global sense we currently have of film’s finitude in the context of “new media,” is poetically reflected upon in Malick’s work not only inherently – that is, not only by virtue of Malick’s work
in the very medium which is eroding – but also at the same time more explicitly through stories which emphasize, through their focus on the impending death of characters, the finitude of the historical body and mind.

Malick’s films emphasize narrative closure via death, and through this they attain, in one sense, a status not only as a finished, closed whole but also a whole foretelling the end of a character with whom the audience has been engaged. As Richard Neupert has suggested in his semiotic study of narrative closure in cinema, “Whereas a film’s first shots are scanned for clues about what major action codes will be opening, the last shots are read for their anchoring proof and condensed summary of all the codes that were set in motion in the text as a whole,” a gradual movement from the seemingly open possibilities of any beginning to the delimited end of possibility inherent in the ending. As suggested above, it is thus possible to argue that Malick’s films comprise a cinema of the movement-image in which cycles of perception, affection, and action result in narrative closure, or in Deleuze’s terms, a finished Whole, in which every detail of narrative and film style at first gradually accrues and in the end attains its final purpose retrospectively, that is, in relation to the end and the resolution of its narrative tensions.

Examples from the plots of his films seem to provide some evidence. At the end of *Badlands* Kit is captured (and, as we learn through Holly’s voice-over, sentenced to death after trial), an end which the “lovers-on-the-lam” genre guarantees the character; at the end of *Days of Heaven* the Farmer dies, an event expected for nearly the entire duration of the film, and Bill’s death serves to add further weight to the apocalyptic tenor that has pervaded throughout; several soldiers die during *The Thin Red Line*, including the central
(insofar as the film has a center) character of Witt, whose final sacrifice grants at least a degree of retrospective meaning to what came before; and in *The New World* the becoming of Pocahontas through a European colonization’s modes of being and living leads to her death, in turn inaugurating, within the film’s fictionalized historical world, the founding of a new country. These deaths and ends are often foretold through narrative structures (most tellingly through the apocalyptic motifs which pattern *Days of Heaven* and anticipate the film’s climax, a sequence in which a plague of locusts leads to an enormous fire), or a structure sometimes working in tandem with our foreknowledge of historical narratives (for example, our familiarity with the outcome of the Pocahontas fable as we watch *The New World*).

Yet, as indicated earlier, Malick’s characters and the perceptions and affections loosely associated with them get in the way of any straightforward consideration of this director’s work as a cinema of the movement-image. I would suggest that while it is accurate to describe Malick’s narrative structures as fatalistic in the abstract, this does not accurately characterize the related functions of character and style in his work, for despite the forward movement which emerges from skeletal descriptions of his historical narratives, the ends of his stories, despite their apparent closure on one level, do not, on another level, retrospectively grant meaning to every detail preceding the closure. Ambiguities on the narrative level and, perhaps even more tellingly, supplements of perception and affection on the stylistic level, remain, and many of these are the product of both the spectator’s engagement with character and stylistic techniques related to that engagement, both of which often operate relatively autonomously from, and indeed
sometimes in resistance to, the historical narrative drive as a whole. Malick’s work, in counterpoint to the foreboding fatalistic tenor generated by his overarching narratives, is also often noted for its striking meditative or contemplative quality, a quality that suggests his fictional worlds are not already fully articulated worlds but are rather still in the making, still open to thinking and different ways of being and becoming. As Simon Critchley has written, this feeling of meditation and contemplation, and thus of a world that still has yet to be made, often emerges from an engagement with Malick’s characters and techniques of style which relate to character, and in particular through the way viewers get to know them (or perhaps, in the case of the puzzling ambiguities they sometimes introduce, *don’t* get to know them). Critchley writes that “[t]he technique of the voice-over allows the character to assume a distance from the cinematic action and a complicity with the audience, *an intimate distance* that is meditative, ruminative, at times speculative. [italics mine].”

Critchley’s notion of “intimate distance” accurately characterizes our experience of engaging with Malick’s characters, for while their voice-overs bring us close to them, the ambiguities generated in that closeness engender a subsequent distance. This quality results in an open dialectic between intimacy and detachment which recurs throughout the films. Malick’s characters experience a fictional world that has them in its grips, so to speak, in the form of the forward movement of narrative progression, but at the same time they introduce to that world the difference of their thinking and speaking, their potential to possibly become something other than what the narrative structure has foretold. Despite the fact of Malick’s historical and fatalistic narrative structures, in other words, there exists in these films times and spaces in which
we feel these fates might have been otherwise. It is the stylistic technique of the voice-over – as will be discussed at much greater length later in this chapter – that provides Malick’s characters with a voice that often intervenes in the meaning which the narrative form appears to gradually develop on the level of plot.

This returns us, in large part, to the function of the question in Malick’s work, discussed in the introduction, for his characters’ voice-overs do not simply confirm or generate the forward thrust of the narrative structures that house them: instead, what they say serves to open questions about the fictional world in which they live, a world which is structured by the procedures of narrative on another level. As we will see, empathetic engagements with these characters allow us to perceive a glimmer of the creativity, agency, life, and potential in them, even if the narrative structure finally insists upon the historical world’s encumbrance of their becomings. In other words, our empathetic engagement with these characters is often at odds with the machinations of historical narrative structures that in Malick’s work – when abstracted from the effects of style and the contingent situations of characters – seem so determinative. As this chapter will argue, this productive tension between, on the one hand, the immediacy of character engagement, and on the other, the mediating and teleological structure of traditional narrative, is in large part a source of Malick’s modernism as well as his empathy for socioeconomically disadvantaged characters (also noted by various critics, particularly in an illuminating exegesis of The Thin Red Line by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit). To that end, following Deleuze, Malick’s films – despite their narrative closure – are more profoundly a cinema of the time-image, or a time-image which emerges from a resistance
to the ineluctable forward progress of history’s movement – in that the lives dramatized remind us of other possible ways of perceiving, existing in, and being affected by the world.

Reflecting further upon the way in which narrative form and style have been historically understood to interact in the institution of film studies offers ground from which we can begin to consider how our engagement with characters and Malick’s style during the event of the film’s projection generates a tension in relation to the retrospective narrative closure in his films. In discussing film narrative, narratologists – following the work of Russian Formalists – have traditionally distinguished between the fabula (the retrospective, abstract content constructed by the viewer upon a total and normatively ideal comprehension of an entire film’s story events as they are ordered by the narrator) and the syuzhet (the equally abstract plot structure which provides the ordering of the story events that allow the spectator, in turn, to construct the fabula). Working in tandem with the generative effects of the syuzhet – according to the arguments of the field’s preeminent narratologist, David Bordwell – are more local, concrete effects of style (such as, for example, the technique of the voice-over), which typically function in ways that serve the story being told. As Garrett Stewart has suggested, in this and other narratological theories “narrative is organized…by repeated incursions of structure into story, or subtext into event, until petering out into a new stability at the end. This is the destined end of every plot tendency, where all is rendered quiescent again by marriage, by death, or by some other closural trope.” In this theory of narratology, the end of the story (and the fabula taken as a whole) determines, retrospectively, and most completely
in standardized cinema, the meaning of every instance of style and the final purpose of
the structure as ordered by the plot.

Bordwell’s theories of film narration emphasize repeatedly the constructive role
that style and plot structure play in generating the viewer’s understanding of the fabula as
a whole. But these theories do not offer the means to reflect upon what is specific to a
particular experience of the medium – that is, they answer the experience of the film
medium only retrospectively, and even then never wholly. At its best, this is a viewer-
response theory of film narration, one less interested in the marks the materials of film
may make on different embodied viewers in contingent experiences of film spectatorship
than in the phenomenon of narrative comprehension more globally. Further, this is a
phenomenon posited by narratology (and cognitivism, upon which it rests) to be not
contingent but universal. Despite the careful attention film narratologists pay to stylistic
deVICES, the analysis of storytelling generated by their narratology can be applied to any
medium which tells stories, not just film. In this move, it is not simply that narratology
excludes from consideration the materiality of the medium itself, although it is true that it
does this; this lack is merely a sign for a more important (but inextricably related) lacuna,
that is, the absence of any consideration of the individual becoming of the film viewer in
a finite situation of viewing. While Bordwell will often emphasize the way in which a
viewer is cued to construct a film’s story through the presence, for example, of a
particular element of film style, it is perhaps more accurate to say that his theory is
ultimately more interested in how that viewer was cued. This dominant theory of film
narration in North American film studies privileges the post-filmic construction of an
already apprehended and ideally comprehended fabula and syuzhet rather than the filmic, present-tense, existential apprehending of style as it unfolds within the projected film (and the difference and contingency – rather than ideal comprehension – which a focus on this present-tense experience necessarily inaugurates). Stewart has usefully suggested how the medium and the stylistic techniques of the medium are, paradoxically, simultaneously valued and effaced in such a theory of narration:

[S]tyle (acting style, editing style, caméra-stylo) is for Bordwell mostly a bonus, an add-on, an adjunct to structure. Even if intrinsic to narration, style is not internal to its shaping logic. For Bordwell, two distinct levels or aspects of form in film (structure on the one hand, as interacting with its local visual or dramaturgical cues on the other) converge to generate on-screen content – and do so by guiding cognition. But think again – or differently. What if style in the cinematographic sense were not secondary or complementary so much as constitutive, more an internal supplement than a ‘plus’? What if the surface of the medium, with all its textual inflections (and deflections), were the only way in which the abstraction of syuzhet could make itself fully felt in the first place? Who, in fact, can really doubt this?

Stewart’s emphasis on what is felt in the viewer’s ongoing apprehension of film style, and the material of the film medium itself, does not privilege the finished and ideal construct of the fabula or the syuzhet that generates it. Rather than focusing on “a new stability at the end” of the fabula – a stability that makes possible the very notion of ideal comprehension – Stewart suggests how our experiences of film style and, insofar as they
are creations of style through a confluence of performance, sound, and cinematography, our related experiences with characters, can generate signification that remains important to us long after the closural tropes of the narrative proper have done their work.

What is curious about Bordwell’s theory of narration – or, perhaps, curious about much cinema – is that an experience of most films, or at least much standardized cinema, would not necessarily pressure his theory of film narration to think more thoroughly through the phenomenological affects of style. In the cinema of the movement-image (which includes most classical and contemporary Hollywood cinema), for example, the fabula – or, in Deleuzian terms, the Whole – does seem to hold a retrospective, deterministic weight over our experience of the film. This is because the cinema of the movement-image pressures us to think the details of the film’s style in relation to a larger narrative which governs it; in standardized cinema, it is ultimately the resolution of the plot which determines the retrospective meaning of preceding details. In the cinema of the movement-image the detail is less important than what the mastered detail means in reference to a much larger, transcendent significance (the meaning of the entire told story, or the fabula as constituted through the plotting mechanism of the syuzhet).

What meaning does this carry for our reflection upon Malick’s cinema? In Malick’s four films the fabula, or whole narrative structure viewed retrospectively, always suggests some degree of fatalism that, retrospectively at least, seems to pervade the entirety of any of the four films. To this end the films always engender a kind of transcendent telos which the narrative structures, in the abstract form of a completed fabula, fulfill. Yet these four films cannot, as I have already suggested, be fully bracketed
under Deleuze’s notion of the cinema of the movement-image, in which every image becomes the instrument of a rationalized and mechanical plot. Indeed, because of this, although each of the films does, of course, possess a fabula (at least within the terms which are set within Bordwell’s theory of narration), insofar as the films function as examples of the time-image, that fabula becomes de-stabilized in part through the difference that Malick’s characters inaugurate into the structures that house them. The fate of the characters, in other words, does not guarantee the particular quality of our own response to them, which is often ambiguous, complex, and unpredictable, contingent not on their place within a gradually unfolding plot but rather on more local, delicate effects of performance, gestures, and other aspects of style. Nor do their fates guarantee our ability to predict the kinds of spaces against which their actions, perceptions, and affections will unfold; a key aspect of the rationalized movement-image is a certain repetition and regularity, the establishment of narrative spaces that are not only repeated but comfortably and predictably repeated throughout the duration of the film. This comfort is avoided, as we will see, through the careful, singular, and self-conscious style of both shot composition and sometimes unconventional editing strategies characterizing many shots and sequences in Malick. There is then, in these films, what we can call, following Stewart, “a supplement of signification”: A sense that the gradual shaping of the whole story world as a finished entity (the fabula) through the machinations of a plot fleshed out through style (syuzhet) does not succeed in fully effacing or containing the affects of style and, thus, our local engagements with character, under the determinative whole of the finished story. One of the ways Malick’s films pressure our thought is
through their consistent ability to leave traces of ambiguities and supplements of signification in both our experiences of character engagement and our apprehension of the director’s style, even at the same time as they head towards a degree of closure on the level of narrative form.

This dialectic between the immediacy of character engagement (at times enabled by a certain kind of affective immediacy in the filmmaker’s style diverting us from the impending telos of the narrative drive) and the mediation of narrative structure (and the medium itself) has further implications for Malick’s representations of history. Malick’s four films have been made in a historical context in which it has become more and more possible for the mediation of historiography to become immediate; that is, home video recording – a technological phenomenon that bridges the twenty-year gap in Malick’s career between his second film and his third, but which is anticipated, at least, in Badlands, in the character Kit’s efforts to memorialize his own experience through technologies of sound recording – has, according to Vivian Sobchack, allowed the public to “see themselves not only as spectators of history, but also as participants and adjudicators of it. Current debates around the nature, shape, and narration of history are no longer only the province of academic historians and scholars of film and literature. ‘History happens’ now in the public sphere[.].”10 If the “immediate history” of the public casts doubt regarding the authority of traditional historiography, as Sobchack later suggests, the public’s sense of history also throw a question mark around the authority of all traditional narratives (most saliently those which are depicting events of the past). Modernist storytellers have investigated this very break between traditional modes of
historical representation, in which lives are given meaning in reference to the authoritatively documented events of history, in their narrative strategies, as Hayden White points out:

Modernist literary practice effectively explodes the notion of those ‘characters’ who had formerly served as the subjects of stories or at least as representatives of possible perspectives on the events of the story; and it resists the temptation to ‘emplot’ events and the ‘actions’ of the ‘characters’ so as to produce the meaning-effect derived by demonstrating how one’s end may be contained in one’s beginning. Modernism thereby effects what Frederic Jameson calls the ‘de-realization’ of the event itself. And it does this by consistently voiding the event of its traditional narrativistic function of indexing the irruption of fate, destiny, grace, fortune, providence, and even of ‘history’ itself into a life (or at least into some lives)…and give the life thus affected at worst a semblance of pattern and at best an actual, transsocial, and transhistorical significance.\(^{11}\)

White’s own historical narrative privileges the existential modernism of Jean-Paul Sartre, whose character in *Nausea* (White’s primary example of modernist intervention into traditional narrative structure) confronts the lack of meaning in his experience.\(^{12}\) Malick’s modernist leanings, despite a debt to existentialism, operate somewhat differently. On the one hand, the traditional structures placing characters into patterns that demonstrate “how one’s end may be contained in one’s beginning” are still apparent in this director’s films when we privilege the fabula, or Whole, that is generated retrospectively. The significance of the four historical moments Malick represents in his oeuvre is achieved at
least in part through the structuring of the lives depicted, the emplotment of moments in those lives which are retrospectively given historical significance, that through structure mean more, in the end, than that which is immediately apparent. At the same time not every aspect of our engagement with his characters – and not every affect generated by his style – is ultimately answerable to this larger structure. Within the histories in which they find themselves housed, the characters themselves try to construct alternative narratives or at least ask alternative questions, often through voice-over, or in Kit’s case in *Badlands*, through the audio recordings that document his feelings and thoughts about his crimes. These aspects of the films operate as relatively autonomous to the eventual fabula which in turn generates, on a separate level, historical significance and a determinative structure that is not accessible within the immediate situation, experience, and becoming of any one character. In other words, Malick’s characters and his style do not simply confirm the traditional historical narrative which gradually emerges in the completed story. Instead they suggest that this narrative could have happened otherwise.

For now, I only want to emphasize that the differences Malick’s characters (and, on a related level, Malick’s style) introduce into the narrative structures of his films justify the next section’s focus on the phenomenological experience of cinema, for it is only in a thick phenomenological description of character and style that an experience of Malick’s cinema can function dialogically. In film experience, we are not just subjects looking at an object. The object is, rather – in a metaphorical sense – a subject, perceiving the world differently than us, and containing within its perceptions the experiences of characters that mark yet another node of difference. This chapter thus
attempts to offer a theoretical propaedeutic which attends to the manner in which these characters question the historical worlds presented to them (and to us), and the way in which those questions emerge from our complex and, in relation to the narrative as a whole, often contrapuntal engagements with his characters. In the pages to follow, then, this project fleshes out this tension between the fate of structure and the contingency of character experience within a more extended study of our own dialogical experience of watching film, and in doing so will inch further towards the fuller encounters with the four films in the chapters to follow.

**Perception, Affection, and the Phenomenology of Film Experience**

Phenomenology is perhaps the richest tradition in film theory that seeks to ground a study of film upon the practice of philosophy. In fact, it is one of the few traditions in film studies that consistently emphasizes the inherent although usually unacknowledged grounding of film theory as a body of thought within philosophy. Within the body of classical film theory, phenomenology finds its greatest champions in the work of André Bazin and, in a far different sense, Siegfried Kracauer. For Bazin, whose theory of film developed alongside the twin poles of phenomenology and existentialism in postwar France, the camera’s phenomenological comportment in relation to the world holds both objective and subjective aspects. The mechanical apparatus of the film camera generates an intrinsic realism which for Bazin “formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man.” In addition to this objectivist aspect of his film phenomenology, however, Bazin also emphasized, as Philip Rosen has argued, the importance of the
human subject’s encounter with the film image, in that the importance of realism to the cinema issues not wholly from the machine itself but rather from the spectator, who finds the historical human desire for preservation of the past ideally achieved by the apparatus of the cinema.\(^{14}\) This focus on the human subject in considerations of film and phenomenology also extends to Kracauer’s theories of film, which emphasize, as in the earlier work of Walter Benjamin, the power of the “optical unconscious” of the film camera, its ability to capture the contingent and unexpected. If the interest of Bazin’s phenomenology leaned towards the preservation of historical space, Kracauer’s work, in Robert Stam’s words, valorized the cinema’s temporal “capacity to register the quotidian, the contingent, and the random, the world in its endless becoming.”\(^{15}\)

In the 1970s, as Dudley Andrew has pointed out, phenomenology fell out of favor as film studies began to develop around the poles of structuralism and more pessimistic social and political theories, which argued against the subject’s ability and agency to make meaning of the world because of the overdetermination of social structures and institutions.\(^{16}\) What Andrew called for as early as 1976, and again in the mid-1980s, was a return to phenomenology in film studies precisely because he viewed it as a useful paradigm to plumb the rich and rewarding mysteries of art – mysteries not in the sense of a reactionary ideological mystification, but rather an open-ended perceptual engagement with the depth of an envisioned world and thus a dialogical engagement with other possible ways of being and expressing being. In reference to the work of Amédée Ayfre and Henri Angel, two of the inheritors of Bazin’s phenomenological film theory, Andrew argued that phenomenology offered an alternative to the tendency of the semiotician to
“increase his knowledge of the system which he analyses but…cannot look beyond…,” here pointing to the tendency of methodological constructs within the humanities, in their application, to only confirm the method through which art is analyzed rather than trace the contours of the object of study itself. In the face of such tendencies, what Andrew later called for was “a study of the zone of pre-formulation in which the psyche confronts the visual text intended for it, and the zone of post-formulation in which the psyche must come to terms with a surplus value unaccounted for by recourse to a science of signification.”

This call for an exploration of the open-ended nature of the experience of the film was answered most thoroughly and persuasively in Vivian Sobchack’s 1992 volume *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, a study whose implications for writing about cinema have not, I think, been fully answered in film studies, despite the book’s generally positive reception. Sobchack intervenes in the history of phenomenology within film studies by explicitly focusing on not only the film object’s relation to the world it films but also the spectator’s subjective, conscious, and rational investment in that world. At the same time, like Andrew, Sobchack counters more deterministic theories of “the apparatus” that posit the spectator as the passive, ideological construct of cinema rather than a rational agent engaged in dialogue with it. Indeed, dialogue and difference are central concepts to Sobchack’s phenomenology of film experience, and she connects them to a study of the relationship between existentialism and phenomenology in postwar French theory, this time through the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, cinema is enabled most profoundly not
by already existing philosophical systems or abstract aesthetic programs which delineate from the outset film’s purpose, but by the desire to perceive the world in new ways in order to become and create new knowledge. Merleau-Ponty, in his 1945 lecture on the cinema, suggests the following:

Ideas and facts are just the raw materials of art . . . Movies . . . always have a story and often an idea . . . but the function of the film is not to make these facts or ideas known to us. Kant’s remark that, in knowledge imagination serves the understanding, whereas in art understanding serves the imagination, is a profound one. In other words, ideas or prosaic facts are only there to give the creator an opportunity to seek out their palpable symbols and to trace their visible and sonorous monogram. The meaning of a film is incorporated into its rhythm just as the meaning of a gesture may immediately be read in that gesture: the film does not mean anything but itself. The idea is presented in a nascent state and emerges from the temporal structure of the film as it does from the existence of the parts of a painting. The joy of art lies in its showing how something takes on meaning – not by referring to already established and acquired ideas but by the temporal or spatial arrangement of elements.19

This “taking on of meaning” is, in Sobchack’s theory (which seeks to dialogue with Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology from the perspective of film theory), a gradual process wherein both film camera and spectator make meaning through the apprehension of visual space. This encounter, in turn, spills over into time, as both film
and spectator are constantly called upon to inflect or reformulate previous interpretations or significations through the continual accumulation of new experiences in new spaces.

In Sobchack’s work on phenomenology, then, the film is not simply viewed existentially by the spectator; the film camera itself also partakes of a certain kind of existential, embodied intentionality projected out towards the world. In this the film is, for example, far different than the photograph, and it is in this difference that Sobchack’s theory is able to move away from the earlier phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. For Sobchack, the photograph is more akin to Husserl’s earlier model of “transcendental phenomenology” – the mode of thinking which Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology explicitly rejects – for, like Husserl, the photograph only describes the basic structure of perceptual experience in which consciousness already possesses the necessary means through which to mediate and negotiate phenomena. That is, like the abstract, static, and transcendental consciousness of Husserl’s phenomenology, the photograph never becomes:

In the still photograph, time and space are abstractions. Although the image has a presence, it neither partakes of nor describes the present. Indeed, the photograph’s fascination is that it is a figure of transcendental time made available against the ground of a lived and finite temporality. Although included in our experience of the present, the photograph transcends both our immediate present and our lived experience of temporality because it exists for us as never engaged in an activity of becoming. Although it announces the possibility of becoming, it never presents
itself as the coming into being of being. It is a presence without a past, present, future.\textsuperscript{21}

We will do well to remember that film is, of course, mechanically enabled by the twenty-four photograms per second which generate, in the apparatus of the projector, the illusion of motion for the spectator. Thus for Sobchack, although Husserl’s transcendental consciousness informs the basic structure of the cinema – that is, the individual photogram in its static presence – in cinema this structure is always animated, made existential through the existence of the filmstrip’s photograms across time and in motion (both the illusory motion of the film on the screen and the very real, mechanical motion of the filmstrip along the projector track which enables the former). “Along with its objective existence for us as spectators,” Sobchack writes, “a film possesses its own being. That is, it has being in the sense that it behaves. A still photograph, however, does not behave; rather, it waits – as a vacancy – for us to possess it.”\textsuperscript{22} Film, despite the best efforts of some film theorists to subjugate its historical finitude to transcendental analytical systems which take film as an (unchanging) object of study, resists efforts that might master and possess it because it never ceases to insist upon its own originality and the difference (relative to human perception) of seeing which its technology inaugurates. The slippage, difference, and slight asymmetry between human perception and film perception guarantees that one cannot possess or hold full power over the other but rather that any meaning-making occurring in an encounter between them will, inherently, always have the potential to become dialogical. Thus the film’s (and the film spectator’s) apprehension of space and its becoming in time issue from its historically finite situation.
This connection allows Sobchack to suggest that film has something like a body of its own, one existing not statically and transcendentally for all time but rather existentially, as defined by its particular intentional projects (i.e., the films of particular filmmakers).

Because film’s perception of the world exists contingently and existentially—never defined, that is, by a transcendental purpose but only meaningful in relation to its particular perceptual projects at particular moments in history—this theory of phenomenology conceives meaning-making in the watching of cinema as a dialogue with viewers in and through historical space. There are two sides to this dialogue, which Sobchack articulates in precise (although rather awkward) terms. On one side of the dialogue, her theory posits “the filmmaker-camera embodiment relation” and on the other, the “spectator-projector embodiment relation.”23 The former describes the filmmaker’s perception of the world as enabled and mediated through the film camera, producing what Sobchack calls a “viewing-view” that is then constituted as a film object and mechanically reproduced through the projector. The projector, in turn, inaugurates for the spectator a “viewed-view” which, despite the fact that its perceptual project is already complete, becomes something new in the viewer’s apprehension of it, as mediated through the apparatus of the projector. This results in a model of cinematic communication that not only complicates any theory postulating the filmmaker as simply the source of a message the viewer receives wholly, but also any notion that the filmmaker’s and the camera’s visions are exactly the same. This idea has important consequences for the spectator’s experience. As Sobchack writes:
We are never completely intelligible and transparent even to ourselves, and others are also never completely unintelligible and opaque in their otherness. Through the instrumentality of the camera and projector brought together in their perceptive and expressive functions and reversible separation, there arises a *partial opacity* between the filmmaker’s perceptions of the world through the camera and the spectator’s perceptions of that same world through the projector. But, there arises, as well, a *partial transparency* that enables both filmmaker and spectator – through instruments – to perceive, express, and communicatively share a common world.\(^{24}\)

This theory of film experience does not consider the perceptions of the filmmaker and the perceptions of the viewer as technologically determined; Sobchack cites Heidegger in order to remind us that “the essence of technology is by no means anything technological.”\(^{25}\) Instead, in this theory of phenomenology, cinematic technology enables a kind of shared creativity and dialogue in the constitution of cinematic meaning. A certain “partial opacity” guarantees that our thoughts and expressions upon viewing the film are not wholly determined by either the director’s intentions or the camera’s perceptual capabilities; and a certain “partial transparency” guarantees that, despite these differences in seeing, a shared space of meaning-making will result which is inflected by each participant in the film experience but not wholly determined by any of them. What results is a “visual *dialogue*” that bridges the space and time of the filmmaker and the camera to the space and time of the viewer and projector.\(^{26}\)
The cited paragraph above also nicely points to how Sobchack, throughout her study, characterizes the cinematic experience and the perception it enables on both the side of the filmmaker and the side of the viewer as, on at least one level, an experience of Derridean *différance* in perception. On the one hand, each of the central participants and instruments constituting the cinematic experience – the filmmaker, the camera, the projector, and the spectator – is marked by a difference in its perceptual capabilities relative to the other. The filmmaker intends towards the world in a certain way, bringing to the filmmaking experience a perception and interpretation of the world enabled by – but also significantly inflected through – the filmmaker’s use of the camera. This “filmmaker-camera embodiment relation” produces a vision which is marked by both what the camera can do (its “unconscious optics,” to quote Kracauer, always potentially goes beyond the conscious intentions of the filmmaker) and the filmmaker’s own perceptual process. In turn, this doubled vision is mechanically re-viewed through the projector for the spectator’s own viewing. The viewer’s experience thus exists within – and is enabled by – the filmmaker’s and the camera’s coterminous perceptions. But Sobchack points out that while the camera enables the filmmaker’s perception (and vice versa), and while the projector enables the spectator’s viewing of that perception, the perception undertaken by filmmaker, camera, and spectator is not entirely the same, and no element of these relationships dominates the other, for each is marked by a difference which necessitates the viewer’s own independent – but still dialogical – hermeneutic act. This is because
the filmmaker must see *through* the camera and the spectator must see *through* the projector for a film to emerge as ‘the perception of an expression which is perceived.’ This does not mean that there is no *hermeneutic relation* in force at this original level. Such a relation is revealed in the constant and pervasive ‘echo focus’ that merges at the juncture of the film’s technological body and the human lived-body and informs the latter’s sense of perception as mediated – experienced as an embodied perception not completely ‘my own.’

“Echo focus” is Sobchack’s phrase (borrowed from work on the phenomenology of technological mediation by Don Ihde) for that juncture marking the difference between a human mode of perception and cinematic technology’s means of envisioning the world. The echo focus points to “a slight pressure existent between the flesh of the body lived introceptively and the exterior and opaque material of the camera that slightly resists the filmmaker’s introceptive appropriation of the instrument.” A similar “echo focus,” or juncture between the human and the technological, exists also in the relationship between the spectator and the projector, a juncture which reminds us – when we recall the entropy of the film print in the projector – of the always finite and historical situation of the dialogue between the viewer and the film. For Sobchack, then, film experience for the spectator is neither overdetermined nor wholly open. It is mediated by the perceptions of the filmmaker, which are, in turn, mediated and enabled by the film camera. The projector then enables the spectator’s own viewing of the already perceived and reconstituted view of the filmmaker and the camera; and it is at this node in the film
experience that the spectator not only perceives a vision but perceives a historically embodied, finite vision that parallels the finite nature of human vision and situation.

Sobchack’s work is valuable for several reasons, partially by virtue of its intervention into ways of writing and thinking about cinema within the institution of film studies. Like Garrett Stewart, Sobchack seeks to shift the discussion from considerations of abstractions and idealizations – such as the *fabula* or *syuzhet*, for example – in favor of focusing our attention on the moment-by-moment experiential embodiment which plays a central role in the making and viewing of films. No ideal theory of cinema can ever wash away the radical particularity of the projected film and the spectator’s experience for Sobchack; indeed, for her any valid history of cinema must begin from within the contingent experience of the film viewer, not from without. It is not only narratology which Sobchack’s work complicates, however; much contemporary film theory becomes an object of critique within her work. The main critique she levels at psychoanalytic theories of viewer subjugation within film theory takes aim at the tendency to grant the film theorist agency insofar as he or she is rationally able to devise a theory of film, and yet at the same time to refuse agency to the spectator within those theories through the construction of an all-encompassing, deterministic theoretical system. This shift from theoretical abstraction and determinism within her work demands, then, a shift away from the ideal of abstraction and a move towards the thick description of the experience of particular films; for Sobchack, the film critic and theorist must not simply write about film, but acknowledge the contingent and always unavoidably impressionistic position from which one thinks through and describes the experience of a particular film.
In regards to her focus on contingency and impressionism, Sobchack’s work, despite its generally strong reception, has itself been open to critique since its publication. The shift away from theoretical and historical objectivism in her phenomenology entails the risk of a certain degree of solipsism; as Malin Wahlberg has suggested, “Although the intersubjective aspects of film experience are important to Sobchack, the phenomenological description tends to be either exclusively personal or just too descriptive: you describe the filmic event and your emotional reaction as thoroughly as possible, and that is the end of it.” Yet I suspect that Wahlberg’s is, ultimately, a rather unfair critique of this theory, as it is a critique focused only on one (admittedly central) aspect of it (the critic’s emotional experience of the film) at the expense of other components of the study that inherently guard against excessive focus on only our emotional experience within the space of the movie theater. Sobchack is at pains to emphasize the viewer’s experience of film as historically situated and finitely embodied, and to that end such an experience is intersubjectively answerable to historical context. Thus, despite her explicit emphasis on the viewer’s (and the filmmaker’s and film’s) perception and expression within historical space, at several key junctures Sobchack’s theory avoids a solipsistic focus on the uniqueness of a contingent experience within space through a paired focus on the existence of that experience as it accumulates further meaning in and across time, and the ways in which a larger historical and social grounding enables the particularity of any individual film experience. The viewer’s experience of a particular film is thus for Sobchack only one point on a long line of film
experiences within history, and to that end the particular and the contingent must remain answerable to and aware of the historical.

Phenomenology, then, on one level rewards the insight gleaned through fresh, novel experiences, but always pressures us to place those insights within the larger discourse of history. Charges of solipsism are thus implicitly answered within Sobchack’s work through her focus on the film’s own perceptual embodiment within history. Original and innovative films do not simply emerge out of the blue. Instead, inventive, rigorous, engaging films – like rigorous and engaging criticism and theory – acknowledge and work from their grounding in history’s automatisms. In turn, they use that grounding to gesture towards new meaning through new perceptual and conceptual projects. In this Sobchack’s work follows closely the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who emphasized in his study *Truth and Method* the grounding of any aesthetic perception or experience within the larger ongoing experience of history, a philosophy that rejects the ahistorical Kantian notion of aesthetic distance and disinterestedness. In Sobchack’s theory, no abstract theory of film experience ever subsumes the particular experience of each and every film, but this does not prevent her from situating these particular experiences within the historical development of the cinema as a whole. Rather than subscribing to a teleological construction of film history, in which the evolution of cinematic technology grows gradually towards an inherent perfection, this theory of phenomenology is focused squarely on the contingent situation of an embodied viewer existing within history. Thus, in this phenomenology, film’s technical means of
perceiving space and becoming in time are always answerable to history. Sobchack develops this idea through her concept of the film’s “autobiography,” wherein

the technical or instrumental history of the cinema is the record of the cinema as a medium realizing itself and its perceptual projects, and adapting its technology, its ‘body,’ to accomplish those intentions – constituting, as it does so, a different world and a ‘new age.’ But such a history is always also freshly inscribed in the personal story, the autobiography, the ‘discourse’ that is the emergence of being of each individual film as it radically lives and rediscovers vision, movement, and hearing, and as it constantly tests the sophistication and conventionality of its current vision against the primordial openness and invention of its inaugural visual encounter with a world….The film’s body matures in its perceptive grasp of the world, in its physical hold upon being, in much the same manner that the human body matures and successfully synopsizes its efforts as the ease of the lived-body, competently realizing its intentions in a world inexhaustibly available to its perception and expression.33

This notion of a “mature film” is not the automatic result of a certain amount of historical technological development and sophistication; as Sobchack discusses elsewhere, purely technological sophistication – a reliance on the most technologically advanced special effects, for example – are no guarantee that a film will be an interesting companion for dialogical engagement.34 A mature film – like a mature spectator – will, in effect, write a fresh history not through the solipsistic rejection of a dialogue with the historical and the social, but rather through a firm grounding in the enabling automatisms of the past, an
engagement with tradition that is not beholden to that tradition but which must remain answerable to it. Conventions, far from disabling new experiences, instead enable new perceptual projects – and form the enabling ground for rational and social dialogue – and in mature films this historical grounding is put into a creative dialectic with the radical openness of every contingent perceptual encounter with reality.

Insofar as Sobchack’s work contains within it any theory of value – one which might justify this project’s valuation of a particular director’s work as a privileged site for historical and philosophical meaning-making – it is in the idea that good films (like good theories) will use their enabling automatisms to encounter the openness of the world in creative, previously unthought-of ways, even if those ways take as their launching pad the conventions (and the narratives) of the past. Boring films (like boring theories) will simply confirm or ritualize familiar perceptual and expressive projects without investing the ground of their enabling automatisms with fresh inscriptions. In other words, although Sobchack argues that we can claim our perceptual and expressive agency in relation to any film, given that she stresses that the film camera is always a historically finite and uniquely embodied entity, an interesting conversation does not happen when only one member of the discussion contributes creativity and meaning. Films themselves can offer more – or less – interesting partners for dialogical meaning-making if they poetically acknowledge their participation in historical, embodied thinking. This project conceives Malick’s cinema as just such a partner; the next section will attempt to further justify this partnership.
The Character’s Experience

We can engage Sobchack’s concepts further by connecting these ideas about the film’s and the spectator’s embodied dialogue within history to the film character’s own embodiment. In this we will press Sobchack’s theory towards a fuller recognition of how the phenomenological critic can answer the charge of solipsism not only through a committed engagement with the historical grounding of film’s automatisms, but also with the historical and social grounding of the character within the film’s diegesis. A first step towards this connection may be made by pointing to the parallel which exists between the film’s and the viewer’s perception within history and the Malick character’s perception and existence within the structure of a fictionalized historical narrative. In Sobchack’s theory, the rigid teleological structure of the traditional narrative of film history is destabilized not by rejecting the importance of the historical, but by emphasizing within the historical the importance of the contingent. In her theory of phenomenology, meaning cannot be made outside of the finite, existential embodiment within and experience of a particular historical situation, which in film experience is the situation of a historical dialogue between the film and the spectator. This dialogue is the product of a difference between the film’s perception and the viewer’s, and to this idea we might add the difference that is found at the site of the character’s perception. Just as the film’s perception is not determined by the development of technology, Malick’s characters represent a particular site of experience that the larger, determinative structures of his films’ historical narratives fail to subsume. They represent yet another node of difference within the dialogical framework of film experience which Sobchack outlines, but one, I
argue, we can develop further within this project to emphasize, more than Sobchack’s own work does, the importance of characters within our dialogues with narrative cinema in general and with Malick’s cinema in particular.

It should be first acknowledged that her study does make a certain limited attempt to account for the presence of the character’s perception within film phenomenology, and the inherent differences between the perceptions of character, camera, and viewer. Sobchack explores the existence of character perception within two broadly different kinds of films: classical Hollywood films and more experimental narrative films which attempt to equate the perception of a character with the perception of the film camera. As Sobchack discusses, most classical Hollywood films do not present action as occurring within the perception of a single character; instead, through what in the history of film theory has been traditionally called the system of the suture, in these films character perception is subordinate to the forward trajectory of narrative, and the film shifts across the perceptions of several different characters as is necessary according to the revelation of narrative information. “Based upon such editorial structures as the shot-reverse shot, or a three shot complex,” Sobchack writes, “the function of suture is not to merely repress the film’s material existence and production of the visible narrative but also to disguise the film’s perceptual presentation of a representation.”

Such films do not, then, attempt to present character perception for its own sake but rather subordinate such perceptions to the demands of the narrative whole. This system is able to function because the film can take up the perspective of any single character smoothly (and nearly invisibly, as has been suggested by those who refer to classical
Hollywood as having an “invisible style”) without self-reflexively calling attention to the material nature of the film’s own perspectival embodiment. In contrast, in many modernist films, self-reflexivity takes the form of referring to the film camera’s presence in some way within the film itself. Examples of this familiar tradition include the films of Jean-Luc Godard – such as *A Woman is a Woman* (1960), *Contempt* (1963), and his *Historie(s) du cinema* (1988-1997), all of which involve the film itself taking film itself as an explicit object of inquiry – or in the documentaries of the Maysles brothers, in which a film camera’s visible presence in the documented proceedings frequently functions to call attention to its production of the images seen, as in *Grey Gardens* (1975), in which the camera appears in a mirror near the end of the film.

Sobchack’s point is that the film camera does not possess any inherent ability to “transparently” represent reality, as has often been assumed in both classical and contemporary film theory, particularly theories decrying the illusionism of the Hollywood cinema and, in their more extreme forms, the illusionism of all films. Instead, the film camera, in conjunction with the system of the suture, has the ability to actively efface its own presence, resulting in a finished film appearing transparent. But simply because a camera and an editing strategy intends to efface their presences is no guarantee that it will result in transparency, for the difference between camera perception and human perception always means that when watching a film we may “grasp ourselves in the recognition that our vision differs from that of the other.”36 While many Hollywood films may succeed in rendering the camera masterfully transparent, in some cases the attempts of the camera to disguise its presence are open to failure. In discussing the
experimental narrative film *Lady in the Lake* (1946), for example, Sobchack points to an intriguing example of a failure in a camera’s attempt to disguise itself by assuming the perspective of a character. *Lady in the Lake*, an adaptation of Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe stories, was an attempt to use the film camera to double as the “first-person” point-of-view of the main character; promotional material for the film proclaimed that the viewer could “become” Philip Marlowe because of the camera’s assumption of his literal perspective throughout the duration of the film.\(^{37}\) Despite this attempt at disguising its presence, however, the fundamental difference between viewer, character, and camera perception emerges unintentionally but unavoidably at key junctures in the film, reminding us of the differences between all three of them. Sobchack points to one example in which Marlowe lights a cigarette. “Pretending to Marlowe’s lived-body,” Sobchack writes, “the film’s body lights a cigarette while looking at a roomful of people and talking to them. Hands enter the introceptively experienced visual field, light a match, hold it to the end of the cigarette that is visible only in part as it disappears from the visual perception into Marlowe’s supposed but unseen mouth.”\(^{38}\) Using this example, Sobchack points to how the viewer’s perspective differs markedly from the character’s perspective (which we supposedly assume throughout the film): viewers are focused on the experimental novelty of the film, which in this case is the lifting of the cigarette to just below the camera’s perspective in order to simulate the act of smoking a cigarette. The audience, while watching this shot, fixates on the novelty of the shot while not really attending to other aspects of the setting while the cigarette is being lit. The character of Marlowe, however, would not in reality focus (like the audience) on the very simple and
unconscious act of lighting and smoking a cigarette; he would instead direct his perception towards the other individuals in the room. This rift between viewer experience and character experience points to a third term – the camera – which always guarantees a slight rupture between the perceptions and intentions of all three of them.

Malick’s films do not attempt such audacious experiments, and only rarely do they assume the strict point-of-view of particular characters through the form of suture. Even in these instances of suture, however, there is always a slippage between what the camera perceives and what the character perceives. (It could be argued that this slippage exists in all films that attempt suture; in Malick’s films, however, the slippage is a salient result of his poetic choices). One example from *Days of Heaven* will, for now, suffice to illustrate how camera perspective (and film style broadly speaking), viewer perspective, and character perspective all function with relative degrees of difference, differences that guarantee that our engagement with Malick’s characters is not so much a matter of psychological identification (as in most conventional Hollywood films) but rather a more complex dialogical experience.

At the end of *Days of Heaven*, the Farmer is killed by Bill. The Farmer’s death is an event expected for the duration of the narrative. However, the event, when it finally does occur, happens in an unexpected manner, for it results through an act of self-defense after Bill’s own life is suddenly threatened. At the moment of the Farmer’s death, which begins with a shot of the character lying prostrate on the ground, we briefly assume what one could loosely describe as his perspective through a point-of-view shot, as the Farmer gazes on at a group of horses which stand against a smoke-filled horizon. Or is this, in
fact, his gaze after all? The composition of the shot is exacting, and is yet another example of the apocalyptic motifs that dot the film as a whole; in fact, because the composition is so careful and precise, the shot becomes an example of what is called “free indirect discourse” in cinema, that is, a moment in a film in which a character’s perspective becomes mixed with the filmmaker’s own. Yet there is another, and in this sequence at least, more pressing, reason why a slippage exists between viewer, camera, and character perspective, because when the film cuts back to the Farmer after showing us what he sees as he dies, the Farmer is already dead. As Garrett Stewart has suggested in his own reading of the film, “For at some indeterminable (invisible) point of transition, this sustained POV shot has surrendered – it turns out in immediate retrospect – any point of consciousness from which it can originate. When we cut back to [the Farmer’s] looking rather than his last view, the dying and now dead man is seen supine and sightless.” Because of his death the very nature of the shot as delivering a “point of view” becomes complex: the humanly embodied “point of view” within this sequence slips away at the moment of death, an explicit sign that the viewer’s own perception is not fully conterminous with the character’s. Yet although the character’s presence within this sequence soon becomes an absence, that temporary presence at least guarantees that what we see is not fully conterminous with the camera, either, since the editing strategy within the sequence provides one temporary point of human origin for the perspective of the horses.

This is one particularly salient example of how Malick repeatedly insists on the perspectival differences that exist among the camera, viewer, and character. This example
also allows us to press further an exploration of how characters function relatively autonomously from the forward movement of Malick’s historical narrative structures, even as that forward movement seems to surpass them in their death. As Sobchack writes – in ways that evoke the moment of the Farmer’s death in *Days of Heaven* which we have just described – “In conventional semiotic terms, the lived-body is the signifier of intentionality, but it is so only in its action as an existence that intends, only in its activity of signifying. (A dead body is a signifier that has lost its signified: the power to signify).” Despite its parenthetical status in the quote I have just transcribed, the loss of the power of signification – and the corresponding emphasis on the living power of signification that characters hold in other moments in the films – seems a central theme to any work of existential phenomenology, and it is also an idea that accrues within Malick as a result of several of the director’s poetic choices, the scene of the Farmer’s death being only one. The point here is that Malick’s characters possess a power to signify autonomous from the camera’s (and the viewer’s) perceptual and expressive capabilities (and autonomous from the narrative structure which orders the various perceptions and expressions of the filmmaker and the camera), even if the dialogical nature of Malick’s work ensures that these capabilities will co-mingle with one another at certain moments in the film experience. This means that Malick’s films do not simply provide us with a window onto clear character psychology – for the most part his work avoids the conventional focus on motivation and goal-accomplishment that is characteristic of most Hollywood narratives. What his films repeatedly insist upon is not the psychologies of their characters and the viewer’s capability to “identify” with them, but rather the
independent power the characters have to signify the meaning of their experiences. Further, this signification can only be recouped in the viewer’s experience by acknowledging the difference between character and viewer, and thus the slippage – the unavoidable incompleteness – that will always exist when the critic attempts to write about what a character has in fact experienced within a given film. Thus, although the death of the Farmer is a particularly salient example of how a character’s powers of perception and expression (and the *loss* of those powers) are ultimately autonomous from that of the viewer and the camera, it points in a more global sense to how these autonomous powers of signification function throughout Malick’s oeuvre, oftentimes in ways that are less immediately noticeable than in the example from *Days of Heaven* provided above.

Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit have emphasized a similar point in their discussion of *The Thin Red Line*. Supporting the idea that Malick often refuses to suture the viewer into a full “identification” with the psychological constitution of a particular character, the authors discuss how we engage with this director’s characters not through sharing the entirety of their perspectives (as in shot-reaction shot structures which seek to efface the camera’s perspective in favor of the character’s) but rather in viewing, through our own perspective, the way their various means of expressivity – whether this be in the form of facial expression, the content of what is said, or other gestures of an actor’s performance and the director’s recording of that performance – register what they perceive, a registration that in turn invites our own act of meaning-making. As Bersani and Dutoit write:
Malick’s camera uses the close-up as a way of giving a face to the particularities of its own point of view. It shows the imprint of the act of looking on the subject of the looking. Very often this close-up is unaccompanied by speech; we see the filmed subject merely looking. Characters thus become multiple cameras within the film, cameras whose points of view, however, are not mediated by (the organisation of the objects they are ‘filming,’ but are rather directly visible on the registering instrument itself, on the face. This gives to the faces of *The Thin Red Line* a unique kind of expressiveness. While they do communicate some easily identifiable feelings…they are not primarily psychologically expressive. They are strongly individuated, but not on the basis of personality; rather, they individuate the different worlds we see them registering.\(^{42}\)

Bersani and Dutoit’s metaphorical description of characters as “cameras” suggests, within the context of this chapter, the historical embodiment of each, the ways in which both character and camera register a more local viewpoint of the world. In this both film style and character viewpoint suggest the ways in which contingent perspectives within Malick’s films resist the forward movement of the narrative structure and the fabula which ultimately contains them. And yet the perspectives of camera and character in Malick remain distinct from one another – they remain “others” – insofar as the film’s camera is able to give the viewer a privileged look into the expressiveness of characters unable, of course, to see themselves perceiving. (Mirrors are typically absent in Malick’s work, and even when they do appear his compositions tend to complicate the ways in which characters engage with them).\(^{43}\) In perceiving what a character’s face *registers*
(rather than wholly suturing ourselves into what, exactly, it is that the character perceives and how exactly the character feels and thinks in regards to that perception), Malick’s films invite us not to identify with characters, necessarily, but more often to make meaning of what it is of the world they express. What these expressions register may be at odds, as I have suggested already, with the forward movement of the historical narratives which house them.

In this way, Bersani’s and Dutoit’s emphasis on performance style later in their reading – the authors compare the eyes-wide-open facial expressiveness of Jim Cavaziel’s Witt, which they liken to a camera with its aperture wide open, to Sean Penn’s squinting character Welsh, whom they liken to a camera which slowly closes its aperture to reveal less light into its lens – suggests that the fictional human beings we perceive in Malick are understood only partially because we always understand them from without rather than from within. The constitution of their subjectivities is not wholly delivered to the viewer; rather, Malick’s films give us only glimpses of contingent viewpoints that do not reveal an already articulated, static subjectivity from which the world is understood. The subjectivity of characters remains an open question throughout Malick’s work not because the characters do not possess subjectivities (although they are always in their own process of becoming), but rather because the camera, the filmmaker, and the viewer do not wholly possess them within their own independent acts of perceiving and expressing. Instead, viewing what characters register and express of the world presses us to respond in turn with our own acts of meaning-making in dialogue with these contingent perspectives. When framed in this light, performance itself becomes another
way in which the local effects of film style are never totally subsumable to the more abstract machinations of narrative form, despite the claims of leading narratologists in the field. How, for example, will Malick’s viewer reconcile Witt’s open view of the world to Welsh’s insistence that the world is closed down and unavailable to the acts of human agents, when the film itself, by remaining impartial, suggests that both viewpoints may be equally valid? And can the viewer reconcile these positions as consistent given that each character betrays other contradictory aspects of interiority at later moments in the film? How can the viewer remain answerable to what we do know of Holly in Badlands and yet at the same time make meaning of the film’s own often ironic distance from the character’s experience? Engaging with characters is only one node within the duration of our experience of any Malick film, in which engaging with the camera’s own ways of moving and seeing the world remains a crucial part of the dialogue.

Another way of framing our engagements with Malick’s characters, complementing the above focus on the manner in which perceptions register on the faces of characters, is a return to the question of unity in Malick’s work, a question through which we can conclude this section. The extent to which Malick’s characters, and their experiences, remain separate from the forward progression of a narrative structure that functions beyond their experience, implies a lack of unity between the ideal abstraction of the fabula, or narrative form, on one level, and Malick’s style and the performances of his actors on another level. This “disunity” is in fact a productive tension between the movement of an historical narrative and the experiences of characters, a tension acknowledged and reflected upon through one of Malick’s most persistent themes,
already mentioned in the introduction: The rift that occurs between the human and the natural. Nature in Malick – as the following chapters will argue at greater length and deeper specificity – functions as a site of utopian unity that always seems just beyond the reach of his characters. Indeed, their attempts to function within nature are either tragically temporary (as evoked in the title *Days of Heaven*, in which Bill, Abby, and Linda get a welcome, but hardly permanent, respite from back-breaking labor when Abby begins living with the Farmer, or in the short-lived romance that is dramatized in *The New World*), comically incongruous (when Kit and Holly abscond to the woods in *Badlands* they cannot escape culture because they carry the detritus of that culture with them), or simply impossible to attain (nature is not only apart from the humans in *The Thin Red Line*, it is the humans who destroy it). Yet this utopian and transcendent unity (with nature, or even with other humans) is still always sought after by Malick’s characters, in different ways and on different levels of awareness.

The desire for transcendence then unquestionably has a role in Malick’s cinema. Yet is that cinema itself transcendent? Some critics have suggested as much. Ron Mottram has written that at “the heart of all four films is an Edenic yearning to recapture a lost wholeness of being, an idyllic state of integration with the natural and good both within and without ourselves.” To the extent that he implies that this yearning is located within the characters, his thesis is not at odds with what I have proposed above, but elsewhere he implies that this yearning is, in fact, shared by the films themselves. But does Malick’s camera and the viewer’s own experience of its perceptions share in this desire for transcendence, or does it merely confront these desires as historical
phenomena, in the form of characters, in its embodiment within the fictional world it depicts? Colin MacCabe has suggested that Malick avoids the historical in his review of *The Thin Red Line*. Suggesting initially that the film “signals a move out of history,” he further emphasizes that

Malick’s genius can be seen in his determination to render Guadalcanal as a real place – not simply the site for the first great land battle between the Americans and the Japanese but a tropical island complete with indigenous peoples. But his depiction of this place is insufferably and patronisingly innocent – a natural world without conflict or contradiction. Its only real function is to signal Witt’s privileged access to a natural order which the army can recognise only as something to destroy.\(^{45}\)

MacCabe here suggests that Witt’s privileged access to a natural order – with all its innocence and naïveté – is shared by Malick himself, whose lyrical depiction of the Guadalcanal, apparently, reflects a desire for a communion with that place which the violence of the war renders impossible. The same has also been suggested by Gavin Smith, who writes “[i]n each of Malick’s films, the world is fallen and tainted, and the affairs of man are ultimately bleak and insignificant, warranting neither sentimentality nor pathos, let alone grace. Only Witt stands outside this.”\(^{46}\) In Smith’s response to the film – like MacCabe’s – it is suggested that Malick’s cinema in fact rejects the historical in favor of a more transcendent, inaccessible realm that the historically finite human being – with the rather distinctive exception of Witt – can never quite grasp.
Further debate about the function of transcendence within *The Thin Red Line* will have to be deferred to my later chapter on that film, but for the time being we can use the discourse that surrounds this film as a gesture towards this study’s understanding of the role of transcendence within Malick’s work as a whole. Does Witt – or any other character in Malick – have a privileged access to this natural order, one which might point to the lack of unity with the natural that apparently obtains in other characters? I would suggest otherwise. Consider, for example, Witt’s reactions to the natives on the island he meets while AWOL on the beach at the beginning of the film, the same natives he encounters again near the film’s conclusion. The first time Witt encounters the natives, they exist in a kind of apparently peaceful idyll; the second time, they exist in a state of internal war, their village burning and their previous apparent peace eroding. The least sympathetic of Malick’s critics have suggested that these depictions function as a rather exotic, colonialist, and primitivist depiction of native peoples. Thomas Doherty has written that “*The Thin Red Line* luxuriates in a sense of place, not history or politics…Malick looks over no-man’s land like a natural scientist bent on discovering new species of plant life.” Yet Witt’s own attitude toward the natives reflects not the film’s investment in, but rather its critique of, the Western colonial gaze’s attempt to master the existence of other peoples. Jacob Leigh suggests that “*The Thin Red Line* allows us to perceive Witt’s comparison of the island’s natural beauty and its inhabitants’ life with the battle between two nations taking place on the island; but Witt’s two experiences in the village imply that he sees only what he looks for: first, harmony amongst the villagers, and between the villagers and their environment; then,
disharmony. On one level, Leigh’s observation usefully points to the way in which Witt’s perceptions exist apart from the film’s. On another, it suggests that Witt projects onto the natives his desire for transcendence beyond the embodied situation in which he finds himself. His sojourn with the natives is, in effect, his own effort to escape history, and to master the meaning of the natives in order to effectuate that escape.

As Leigh later suggests, “Suspended throughout The Thin Red Line is Witt’s belief [in the capacity to transcend historical situation]; yet, while indicating the transformative effect his idealism has on his comrades, the film’s evaluation of that idealism remains purposefully undetermined.” In other words, our empathetic engagement with Witt – and, I would suggest, all of Malick’s characters – is tempered by a certain skepticism engendered not only by Malick’s aesthetic (which takes as one of its enabling – if not primary – automatisms the modernist effects of distanciation and Brechtian alienation in which certain strands of film culture were steeped at the beginning of Malick’s career) but also by the difference that exists between the perceptions and experiences of the filmmaker, the camera, the character, and the spectator. To the extent that his cinema insists on the autonomous perceptions and historical embodiment of the viewer, the filmmaker, and the character, transcendence in Malick functions on a thematic level, as a desire in his characters that functions historically and as a historical phenomenon is open to our own separate acts of perception, expression, and dialogical signification.

In the dialogical nexus that is any Malick film, camera, viewer, and character all have purchase on the making of meaning, and what this ultimately means is that in
thinking through his cinema we cannot limit ourselves to static, cognitive idealizations of filmic comprehension that might occur in our post-filmic reflections of the film experience. The local, the affective, the stylistic, and the performative are not mere adjuncts to the retrospectively attained *fabula*, as the most powerful theories of narratology within the field of film studies claim. Instead, these various “marginal” sites within our historical experiences of films are what we must ultimately respond to, I think, in any film criticism which seeks a more thoroughly *ethical* view of its subject. In the next section, I will show how these local engagements with characters and film style with a brief discussion of the “critical poetics” that the remainder of my project, in its readings of Malick’s four films, practices.

**Conclusion: Towards a Critical Poetics**

In the four chapters which follow this project seeks a philosophical dialogue with Malick’s four films. Many of the key critical automatisms for these dialogues have been outlined in the first three chapters of this study, including Deleuze’s concepts of the movement-image and the time image, the interrelation between the fabula and the syuzhet, and the role of phenomenological perception of historical space as it functions across the varying levels of viewer, filmmaker, camera, and character. Through this approach I hope to have emphasized how a metaphysics that functions outside the realm of history will fail to help in answering the questions Malick’s work poses for us. The critical poetics I practice in the following chapters, then, is embodied in the history of film criticism and philosophy just as Malick’s own poetic choices are embodied in film
history. Because so embodied, mine is a practice prepared not only to use certain ideas to write about Malick’s films but also to refigure those ideas through a more thoroughly dialogical, phenomenological, and ethical engagement with the films. In other words, in this engagement, the films cannot leave the ideas we bring to them untouched and unchanged; they prompt us, in particular ways, to reflect upon the validity of our ways of knowing and being in the world. Just as creative films refigure conventions, our dialogues with valuable films press our critical conventions, assumptions, and prejudices to refigure themselves as necessary. A flexible critical poetics is then a reflection upon questions of value that, while drawing upon the history of philosophy and theory, wants to be more malleable in its effort to trace the ways we can think through what we have valued in experiences of cinema. In this sense, reviewing what we have valued at the cinema – a debate about which films are great – mobilizes us to reflect upon our historical storehouse of concepts as they have existed in the history of film criticism, theory, and philosophy.

The first three chapters of this study have largely pivoted around the question of how films pressure us to think across time and how our perceptions of film in space initiate this pressure in a complex dialogical fashion that stresses the difference that obtains in the perceptions and significations of the filmmaker, the camera, the character, and the viewer. I have not said much up to this point about how these ideas may be animated in the actual writing of a philosophically informed film criticism – my primary practice in the remaining four chapters of this study – and thus I would like to close this
chapter with a brief discussion of my own critical practice, which I bring to the task of writing about the dialogue Malick’s films initiate with us.

How can criticism be useful today? As discussed earlier, criticism as a scholarly endeavor in film studies has been displaced, in one way, by paradigms of historiography, which tend to view criticism and evaluation as merely tools for delineating the functions and effects films have in particular historical contexts rather than means of evaluating the past, present, and future usefulness of the concepts we bring to an experience of film. I do not wish to contest the undeniable validity of this particular employment of criticism. However, I do want to stress that it is only one particular way in which critical writing in the academy may be practiced. Fortunately, as Laura U. Marks has also observed in her recent work on phenomenological criticism, “Film criticism is proliferating again, along with historiography, as people are interested to derive theory from the objects themselves rather than impose theory on objects.”50 Like Marks, I celebrate this return to criticism within particular theoretical projects and the emphasis it places on the ways in which films themselves contribute to our thinking and writing. However, the objection is still made that criticism is, following the sociological critique of Pierre Bourdieu, a kind of “tastemaking” which is determined by the critic’s social class and is inherently lacking in the kind of egalitarian ethos that has largely pervaded film studies since the rise of cultural studies in the late 1980s, and which prompted the rise of audience reception studies at the expense of close study of particular films by academics themselves.51 Such a critique has merit, although its validity might be tested by acknowledging the extent to which all forms of academic practice – whether this be the practice of philosophy or the
practice of cultural studies which wants to analyze class – are already inherently bound up with questions of social hierarchy and inaccessibility, given the American university’s unavoidable complicity with the system of capitalism it frequently critiques. I also suspect we need to acknowledge further how our ways of knowing are always bound up with issues of taste – whether this taste is for particular films or a taste for particular theories, or both (given the extent to which postmodernism has blurred the distinction between art and theory, or film and textuality, I have my doubts as to whether or not it is possible for that same postmodernism to distinguish between a taste for art and a taste for theory).

The point of this departure is to suggest that film criticism’s historical practice of evaluating and judging films does in fact go beyond the establishment of historical paradigms of taste (or, to put it otherwise, that these paradigms of taste can initiate, in ways that are usually unacknowledged, horizon-opening debates about the values of films). Criticism and the arguments over films they initiate can, in other words, mobilize our knowledge in often unpredictable ways, and, perhaps better than deterministic sociological and political theories, act as a catalyst for open debate on the value of what we have seen (debate which, of course, can and in many cases must include a focus on the political). Richard Rushton, in a recent essay in *CineAction* (a Canadian publication which is perhaps the most politically committed film journal in the recent history of film studies) poses such a question directly, arguing that critical practice, and arguments about greatness, serve a larger dialogical purpose:
Film criticism, at its best, is a matter of knowledge. However, it is not a form of knowledge that can be empirically proven, and it is thus a mode of knowledge that differs markedly from the kinds of knowledge expected by audience researchers . . . [T]he kind of knowledge applicable to film criticism – or to criticism more generally – is not that of ‘adequacy to the world’; the test of film criticism is not one of discovering whether people agree with one’s claims or not. Rather, film criticism is a matter of opening the world up to the possibility of agreeing with one’s claims. And this is a model of potential knowing: the risk the film critic takes is that of testing his or her propositions about a film, of trying to test what propositions about films and ways of understanding the world might be shared with others, might be agreed upon by others as propositions that will count as knowledge.52

This idea has been echoed in work by Greg Taylor on the practice of American film critics Parker Tyler and Manny Farber, who insists on the continuing cultural importance of the American film critic, stressing “the dire need for critics able to transcend the reviewer’s sorry status of ‘underpaid cheerleader’ for the culture industry…Critics are needed, quite simply, to help build and maintain a constituency for film art.”53 Beyond building such a constituency (or interpretive community) – a constituency that would exist, I suspect, to question precisely what is meant by the phrase “film art” – criticism may serve the larger purpose of prompting us to reevaluate our own ways of knowing the world. This open-ended propositional mode of criticism – in which what is put forth as criticism exists in a precarious but possibly fruitful state as a potential form of knowledge
– intersects and dialogues with our accepted knowledge (the history of film theory and philosophy). As the metaphor suggests, this intersection signals a two-way street. On the one hand, the potential knowledge of criticism seeks validation and affirmation through this historically existing body of theoretical and philosophical concepts. On the other, though, theory and philosophy are themselves challenged to reflect upon their accepted ways of knowing in the face of criticism which may in fact, in moving from its initial status as potential knowledge to knowledge, contest some accepted philosophical or theoretical claims. If any dialogue can exist between the historically distinctive practices of criticism, on the one hand, and philosophy and theory on the other, I suspect it will look something like what I have just proposed.

It is worth remembering at this point how this mode of critical practice, in a sense, parallels the act of artistic practice and its emergence from within the bounds of history, and how it can be distinguished from the automatisms of historiography (a related, though separate, practice, which in recent years in film studies has largely banished a salient role for critique and interpretation). Like the making of any film, criticism is bound up with history. My focus on a historical poetics is paralleled by my own historically available automatisms as a critic, existing as creatively enabling tools within the history of film theory, criticism, and philosophy. In parallel to a historical poetics honing in on the moment of the film’s making and the historical lineage of filmmaking whose existence enables that making, a critical poetics operates historically at the point in which the critic views the film. It is best, in this light, to think of critical automatisms as a set of flexible conceptual options that dialogically engage with film’s powers of
expressing thought, concepts in turn refigured in each encounter with a film. This
engagement and the concepts it draws upon seeks not to master those powers of
expression in the closed-down creation of abstract and deterministic theoretical systems
or through referring to a single philosophical metatext (as previous work on Malick has
too often done), but rather in order to dialogue with the questions Malick’s films pose to
us, resulting in a more open-ended creation of knowledge that is itself situated within the
historical evolution and re-evaluation of film criticism, theory, and philosophy.

As a result, each of the following four chapters dialogues with a different Malick
film with the help of critical concepts that, in some cases, are justified by the single film
in question, and in other cases function more globally as enabling ideas with which to
engage with the four films as a single oeuvre. I want to conclude this chapter by briefly
mentioning two more general automatisms which will govern the way I write about
Malick’s cinema as a whole. These specific tools, which emerge from the history of
criticism, theory, and philosophy, are geared towards a dialogue with the particular films
and the concerns they themselves point to, but two more automatisms – all of which
emerge out of this project’s interest in the phenomenology of film experience – will help
guide my critical and philosophical practice in a more general sense in the chapters to
follow. The first of these is Laura U. Marks’ idea of haptic criticism; the second, Mikhail
Bakhtin’s notion of the “aesthetic event,” which will allow this project to both develop a
critical practice in regards to empathetic engagement with characters and to connect that
engagement with the historical ground in and against which the character is figured.
Laura U. Marks’ work on film experience follows, within the history of film theory, Sobchack’s phenomenology, and seeks to develop from that phenomenology a means of critical practice that is faithful to the contingent embodiment of the film spectator. Marks focuses on how the contingent and sensual encounters with audiovisual works of art may be transposed within the relatively more symbolic realm of critical writing. In other words, she seeks a critical practice – which she calls haptic, or bodily, criticism – in which “[s]ymbolization, which includes language, is not a rupture with sensuous perception but exists on a continuum with it.”

She is suspicious of the information age’s tendency to master objects of sensuous experience, which “is making us very good at symbolization, at the expense of bringing us into contact with that which we do not know and for which we have no categories.” In terms of my own project, Marks’ focus on the mortality of materiality is of particular use. “Materiality is mortality,” she writes. “Symbolization, or the abstraction of communication into information, is an attempt to hold mortality at bay. When I insist on the materiality of an image, I draw attention to its aspects that escape our symbolic recognition.”

This acknowledgement that the knowledge we produce is produced from a finite and historically embodied situation does not disable criticism, or philosophy, but rather results in “haptic” kind of criticism, a delight in impressionistic description and, from a self-consciously finite viewpoint, evaluation of what has been perceived, description which insists on “[t]ouching, not mastering.” Further, I would suggest that such a haptic criticism – when positioned more explicitly within the phenomenology Sobchack develops and its insistence on the productive slippage between the perceptual capabilities
of filmmaker, camera, viewer, and character – avoids the solipsism otherwise possible in phenomenological criticism. In other words, if haptic criticism – our description of the experiences we have valued in engaging with cinema – intersubjectively extends also to a description of the haptic registers with which the filmmaker, the camera, and the character engage with the world, such a criticism has the potential to extend beyond what is immediately immanent to its own experience while at the same time always acknowledging that it is enabled, and indeed finitely limited, by that experience.

The notion that our own perceptual experience is limited – that it functions as only one juncture along a much longer line of experience that, within the limits of film phenomenology, also contains the filmmaker, camera, and character, and, in the post-filmic situation of film criticism, involves the historical weight of previous critical discourse – pressures this project’s critical practice to develop an ethical dimension, that is, a dimension that remains answerable to ways of doing and making which exist outside of the critic’s own experience. This ethical dimension prevents phenomenological description from becoming solipsistic; it demands that, at a certain juncture, the evaluations inherent in phenomenological description become something else, a something else with a keen eye towards the larger social and historical world outside of a singular experience. While this ethical dimension is implicit in the model proposed by Marks, I suggest just such a dimension can be more explicitly gleaned from Mikhail Bakthin’s early work in phenomenology, in particular through his concept of answerability, un/finalizability, and oustideness. It is with these concepts, and Bakhtin’s
related idea of the aesthetic event, with which we can close this chapter and proceed onto a critical engagement with Malick’s films.

Bakhtin, throughout his career, was interested in the radical particularity that defined every finite being’s stake in the world. Although a deeply engaged theorist and philosopher, Bakhtin consistently rejected systematic and mechanistic thinking (which he referred to as “theoretism”) because abstract generalizations and tired, incessantly repeated terminology and phrasings (which accrue to dangerous levels in institutional contexts that become too exclusive) fail to account for (and actively prevent) the way in which each human being occupies a position of meaning-making in space and time that is irreplaceably unique and unrepeatable. His eventual literary theory of dialogism (the language this study’s own focus on the “dialogical” heavily evokes) grew out of his early phenomenology and attempted to account for the extent to which each utterance, as unique and unrepeatable, is inevitably caught up in a web or network of other equally unique and unrepeatable discourses. Fundamentally, his earlier theory of the radical contingency of each individual’s being in the world is tethered to perception and the nascent creativity inherent in all acts of perception:

This ever-present excess of my seeing, knowing and possessing in relation to any other human being is founded in the uniqueness and irreplaceability of my place in the world. For only I – the one-and-only I – can occupy in a given set of circumstances at this particular time; all other human beings are situated outside me.
In terms that recall our earlier focus on Sobchack’s phenomenology of film experience, Bakhtin emphasizes the finite historical situation – “the span between birth and death in a particular being-there,” as one of Bakhtin’s best critics, Michael Holquist, has written – from which each of us perceive, think, and act in the world. Possible dangers of solipsism also exist in Bakhtin, as in every theory of phenomenology, but are answered explicitly in his early work by the degree to which he emphasizes that our becomings in the world are inextricably bound up with our answerability to other human beings and the world around us, precisely because other human beings are what is needed for us to become at all. In other words, Bakhtin acknowledges the difference that exists between interlocutors, and indeed prizes the way difference itself enables interlocution. For Bakhtin, then, these differences – and the dialogues which spark from it – are the very source of the meaning of our being-in-the-world. Our relationships with others are contingent, “relative and convertible,” and they cannot be mastered through a systematic ethics of being, doing, or making that is not given in perception. An ethical criticism is thus aware of its power and its ability to make meaning authoritatively – that is, to make a meaning which is authored and which, as authored, an author takes the responsibility for – but is equally aware of the contingent and finite place from which such meaning is written. Authority, in Bakhtin’s sense, is intent on authoring its own experience and in doing so it extends its descriptions and evaluations to other points-of-view (other authorships) in the world.

An engagement with a work of art is one way in which an extension to other points-of-view may be reached. This ethical challenge which faces every being – and, for
Bakhtin, intellectuals and artists most acutely— is something he attempted to work through, in relation to art, in his closely intertwined aesthetic concepts of “outsideness,” “unfinalizability,” and “the aesthetic event,” which Deborah J. Haynes has studied in relation to our aesthetic experiences of the visual arts. For Bakhtin, “Every aesthetic event,” as Haynes has written, “requires two consciousnesses, two unified and unique participants.” In the arts, as Bakhtin posits it, this involves, on one side, the relationship between the author and the protagonist; and on the other, the relationship between the viewer and the protagonist. In our engagements with characters (and the worlds in which those characters exist, as created by the author) we, in a sense, act as authors who complete the experience of an aesthetic object, for we stand outside—like the author, and relative to the protagonist—the experience of the world depicted within the object. Like the author, then, we enact our own authorship through an experience of the work of art. It is what Bakhtin called “outsideness”—or a difference in embodied perception that exists across all human beings, across all cultures, and across different moments in history—that defines the character of the aesthetic event, “for it is only from the outside that the event can be completed, consummated, finalized.” It is very important to note that Bakhtin’s concept of “un/finalizability” is also bound up with the inevitable incompleteness inherent in any act of writing, thinking, or art-making. In other words, for Bakhtin for something to be “finalized” does not mean that an art work is finished after one person has looked at it and thought through it; the same individual may “consummate” and “finalize” the work of art in different ways at different moments in a life. It is, rather, a more temporal kind of consummation, one which ties up our experience of the aesthetic
with different nodes along a much longer line of our own becomings within history, a
history that exists outside of the aesthetic and which we remain answerable to within our
own aesthetic experiences.

Bakhtin’s concept of “outsideness” speaks further to the empathetic engagement
with characters in film that the first three chapters of this project have attempted to
explore, and his idea that engagement with character must be part of a larger dialectic
between empathy and distance is useful when approaching Malick’s films, since they do
not require that their viewers identify or empathize wholly with character experience (at
times the films adopt a measured and sometimes ironic distance towards their characters).
Bakhtin, to that end, defined “the aesthetic event” and aesthetic activity proper as
something which only occurs when empathy is eventually accompanied by distance and a
return to the self, as Haynes has suggested: “The second moment of aesthetic activity
[after the act of empathisizing with a character] properly begins only when one returns
within oneself to one’s singular place, outside of the other person or object, and when one
gives form and finalization to the experience of projecting the self.”65 Our immersion in
the lives of film characters (and, to the extent that we are ever able, our identification
with them and projection of our selves into them) occurs always, for Haynes as well as
Bakhtin, in a dialectic which is met on the other side by a return to ourselves and our own
finite embodiment within and answerability to a larger history. Our experience of cinema
in the space of the theater, then, spills out onto the discourses of history in ways that the
first three chapters of this study have attempted to explore.
My practice in the following four chapters thus prizes the authority of the film critic, and attempts to expand this authority through a critical engagement between film studies and philosophy. At the same time, I seek to acknowledge the finite place from which the author speaks and the responsibility inherent in any act of authority, and the role history plays in terms of the production and cultural context of each of Malick’s four films. This study thus holds onto the value of historiography and the potential historiography has to show us how a way of organizing film’s blocks of movement and duration – and thus the pressures they place on our thought – can emerge from a larger historical and cultural background. It also acknowledges the dialogical nature of our experiences of Malick’s films, experiences in which we are never able to master the visual and in which our own perceptions and expressions brush up against the perceptions and expressions of other lives and ways of perceiving. And, finally, it seeks to show how Malick’s films, and the stress they frequently place on the image and the soundtrack as independent carriers of meaning apart from narrative, call upon us to think philosophically and draw upon the history of philosophy. Malick’s films challenge the critic in unique ways, and in meeting this challenge the practice of film criticism is called upon not only to evaluate and describe Malick’s images and sounds but to do so by remaining answerable to history.


24 Vivian Sobchack, The Address of the Eye, 194.


26 Vivian Sobchack, The Address of the Eye, 173.

27 Vivian Sobchack, The Address of the Eye, 190.


29 Vivian Sobchack, The Address of the Eye, 177.

30 The primary targets of her critique are Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz. See Vivian Sobchack, The Address of the Eye, 276 – 277.

31 Malin Wahlberg, Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 20.


33 Vivian Sobchack, The Address of the Eye, 168.

34 Vivian Sobchack, The Address of the Eye, 255-256.

35 Vivian Sobchack, The Address of the Eye, 228.

36 Vivian Sobchack, The Address of the Eye, 276.


38 Vivian Sobchack, The Address of the Eye, 239.

39 Free-indirect discourse has been perceptively discussed in John Orr, Contemporary Cinema (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 1-8, 20-21, 62-64, 77-79, 86-88, 210-211.

40 Garrett Stewart, Between Film and Screen: Modernism’s Photo Synthesis (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 159.

41 Vivian Sobchack, The Address of the Eye, 65.

42 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, Forms of Being, 145.

43 The general absence of mirrors in Malick perhaps suggests an unwillingness on a character’s part to confront his or her own personal history. Exceptions include The Thin Red Line, when Sean Penn’s Top shaves in front of a mirror, or in Badlands when Cato looks in the mirror before he dies.


46 Gavin Smith, “Let There Be Light,” in *Film Comment* 35, no. 1 (Jan-Feb 1999), 9.


56 Laura U. Marks, *Touch*, xi.

57 Laura U. Marks, *Touch*, xii.


59 Within film studies, the most useful discussion of dialogism can be found in Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992).


CHAPTER FOUR: ON BADLANDS

Two Time Capsules

The relationship between embodied thinking, finite historical situation, and the becoming of the subject through time pertain to both the fictional worlds of Malick’s films as well as to our own experience of his filmmaking. Two sequences bookending the narrative of Badlands (1973) concretely introduce these ideas into Malick’s oeuvre. In the first act, the twenty-something Kit Carruthers (Martin Sheen) and the fifteen-year-old Holly Sargis (Sissy Spacek) begin a romantic relationship, of which Holly’s father disapproves. In a scene approximately fifteen minutes into the first act, Kit and Holly launch a red balloon into the air. Attached to the balloon is a box which includes, as Holly tells us in voice-over, “a solemn vow” from Kit in writing that “he would always stand beside me and let nothing come between us.” Alongside this written declaration are also, Holly says, “our little tokens and things.” This attempt at self-preservation (the first of several throughout the film) is at the same time an acknowledgement – tacit on Kit’s part, but stated more or less explicitly by Holly – that their days together are of a transient nature. Kit’s “heart was filled with longin’,” Holly says, projecting her own emotion onto the placid Kit, “as he watched it drift off. Something must’ve told him that we’d never live these days of happiness again, that they were gone forever.”

Immediate connections between Badlands and Malick’s subsequent films become clear in watching this sequence more than thirty years after the film’s initial release. Holly’s observations regarding the transient nature of her relationship with Kit –
their “days of happiness” – evokes the title of Malick’s second film, *Days of Heaven*.

Less directly, we are reminded of similar fleeting moments of fulfillment in *The Thin Red Line*, in flashbacks of soldiers at war who remember loved ones back home, and *The New World*, in the brief relationship between John Smith and Pocahontas. This transience is, of course, not simply a thematic element of Malick’s universe, but is reflected on a stylistic level as well, for *Badlands* contains early signs of Malick’s interest in capturing through his camera impressionistic images of nature, such as the quick glimpses of fauna and flora we see after Kit and Holly escape to the woods after the film’s first act. Here we are reminded that the supplemental value of theme, image, and sound which exists in any single one of the films – resonate themes or affecting moments of style, for example, that cannot be immediately reduced as only vehicles for narrative information in the single film we are presently watching – will reverberate throughout the director’s oeuvre, at once gesturing towards later films and, in the case of the films made after *Badlands*, asking us to reconsider the earlier ones in the light of new images and sounds.

This balloon sequence also speaks more immediately to our single experience of *Badlands* because it generates in the film a structure through its pairing with a later sequence in which the characters create another time capsule. In the third and final act, approximately twenty minutes before the end of the film – and prior to Kit’s capture by the police, after he has murdered several individuals across a handful of Midwestern states – Kit and Holly collect more of their “tokens and things,” including several photographs Holly has brought along on their journey. This time, however, they do not launch these tokens in a red balloon, but rather bury them, dropping them in a time
capsule that they place in the ground. While the balloon suggests the finite and fleeting nature of existence, as well as the way in which the past often seems distant from the immediacy of our embodied existence, the film’s second time capsule is a more severe symbol of completion and finality: If there is, or was, something to be understood, it is now located in a memorial for others besides Holly and Kit to dig up and understand.

Here, then, are two time capsules. The first, attached to a red balloon, hovers above the characters, a striking aspect of the texture of Malick’s own images. It is vibrant enough that, in our own viewing of the film, we ourselves feel as if able to reach out and touch it, and yet once launched it remains outside of the grasp of the characters themselves. In addition to functioning as an elegiac sign of transient experience, the kind that will recur throughout Malick’s work, we also find in this image of the balloon an early sign that our understanding of what we see in Malick’s images will not always be entirely commensurate with the experiences of the characters, for as the balloon becomes more distant from them it becomes, as image, closer to us, more immediate and meaningful as an element of cinematic composition. The second time capsule, too, speaks to our experience of the film itself when we are reminded that it contains Holly’s photographs; their burial near the end of the film signifies the completion of the characters’ journey while also indirectly reminding us of the photographic basis of the celluloid film that is the film Badlands. As Garrett Stewart has suggested of the sequence, “along with every other photographic frame we see in and as the film, these too, having passed by in series, are finally put back in the can, to show forth at some other and later time, perhaps long after the death of any present viewer, before the ‘wonder,’ to quote
Holly quoting Kit, of other eyes than ours.”¹ Their experience together is finished, as is our experience of the film, but a larger meaning of either of these has yet to be made. Holly’s voice-over, perhaps, is one attempt at that meaning.

Of course, meaning has already been made of *Badlands*. As itself a time capsule of New Hollywood Cinema circa 1973, the film comes to us not only with these images (which we are now more likely to experience through that time capsule of celluloid, the DVD, rather than celluloid itself), but with a historical critical reception that has grown each time the film has been “unearthed” over the last thirty years. Aspects of this reception will be explored as this chapter proceeds. But it is also worth pointing out that Kit and Holly are themselves, at least in broad outline, also kinds of memorials, signifying something of the American past through the film we are presently watching. *Badlands* is very loosely based on the historical figures of Charles Starkweather, a twenty year-old drifter and dropout, and Caril Ann Fugate, his fourteen year-old girlfriend, a pair who, eluding authorities across the badlands of the American Midwest, were responsible for a murder spree resulting in eleven deaths in 1958. But despite this connection, we should ultimately not misunderstand Malick’s film as an attempt to account historiographically for Starkweather and Fugate’s actions, and the plot of *Badlands*, when described abstractly, shares only superficial similarities with the actual events. Nor does the film attempt to understand these historical events as might a conventional Hollywood historical film; what the two time capsules discussed above begin to suggest is that any larger significance remains at arm’s length from the characters throughout their experience, and thus the significance of the events for the viewer remains an open
question. *Badlands*, rather than projecting a confident understanding of the events upon which it is only loosely based, is in many ways about the refusal of its characters to grapple with the meaning of historical existence. In this, the film throws into relief the nature of characters in later Malick films, who are more willing (if not always more able, given the situations in which they find themselves) to make sense of the phenomena and events which they encounter.

The plot of Malick’s first film is easily enough described. A vaguely rebellious twenty-something man, Kit, meets a fifteen-year-old girl, Holly; the two of them begin a romance. After Holly’s disapproving father is first confronted, and then killed, by Kit, the young couple flee by car. What follows is a killing spree resulting in the deaths of four more individuals (or possibly six more, given that the fate of the young couple Kit shoots later in the film is left uncertain). After having become both pursued targets of the authorities and something of cultural celebrities (something which Malick, in contrast to *Bonnie and Clyde* and its focus on the relationship between violence and fame, deals with only briefly in a fabricated newsreel presented halfway through the film), Kit and Holly are eventually caught. Kit is sentenced to die by lethal injection; Holly marries the son of her defense lawyer, as she tells us in her final voice-over.

Malick refuses the potentially sensationalistic lure of this material in favor of depicting what often initially appear as quotidian details, and his focus on characters experiencing the fleeting contingent moment is in counterpoint to the fatalistic trajectory of the narrative, as in all of his films. That Malick will be preoccupied with the concrete, and occasionally quite banal, experience of his infamous young couple is apparent
enough from Holly’s own narration. Near the beginning of Badlands, for example, Holly tells us of the entire trajectory of the journey that is about to be dramatized on the screen, but in a rather blasé voice-over that betrays a lack of confidence in its own melodramatic content: “Little did I realize that what began in the alleys and back ways of this quiet town would end in the badlands of Montana.” Holly’s statement, beyond what it implies about her lack of sharpened sensitivity to the extraordinary events she is about to experience, implies also that what the viewer is about to see on the screen is complete, and that the meaning of the end of the journey is in some way connected to its beginnings. In other words, Holly herself would like us to consider Badlands an epic adventure characteristic perhaps of the popular culture with which she is most familiar.

Yet as the viewer will soon discover, in Badlands the characters do not undergo the typical trajectory of the journey in the classical cinema, in which the confident actions of a protagonist are confirmed in the successful resolution of a conflict in a plot. As the time capsule motif implies, the meaning of Holly and Kit’s experience remains far more open-ended, for it is possible to regard both the balloon and the buried capsule – among the many other kinds of salient and recurring images and sounds which Malick presents throughout the film – as types of Deleuzian time-images, functioning not to cement a finalized significance onto the film but rather pressuring us to make sense of that which the characters themselves fall short of thinking through. The fact that Kit and Holly do not so much confront these time-images but rather abandon or avoid them (first by flight, then by burial) suggests again the gap that marks the space between our experience of the film’s spectators and the experiences of our “heroes.” Malick’s repeated images and
sounds – which in this film include memorials, animals, repeated lines of dialogue, and recurring types of camerawork, among others – accumulate a thematic weight as the film proceeds, but it is one the characters themselves hardly seem to feel; our sensitivity to image and sound as viewers often seems to exceed the ability and willingness of Kit and Holly to respond to the world meaningfully.

What follows explores *Badlands* with this fundamental idea in mind, exploring the film through a look at the major motifs mentioned earlier in this study: the uncertain journey, the break between character and landscape, and the voice. In this chapter, I will focus primarily on the first two of these motifs, exploring Holly’s voice-over as is necessary for a fuller discussion of the other motifs but saving an extensive discussion of its function for the beginning of the next chapter, in which I will make the effort to connect the significance of the voice-over in *Badlands* to its subsequent appearance in *Days of Heaven*. This chapter, then, marks one more attempt to “unearth” the meaning of *Badlands* – this time in a decidedly philosophical register – and we can use each of these motifs as guides to the excavation.

**A Journey through Badlands**

*Badlands* emerges from a tradition of American cinema called the “lovers on the lam” film, a genre which also includes such noteworthy entries as *You Only Live Once* (Fritz Lang, 1938), *They Live by Night* (Nicholas Ray, 1947), and *Bonnie and Clyde*. However, the time capsules discussed above signify that Malick’s first film is also part of a larger lineage of postwar filmmaking that marks the break signified in Deleuze’s concept of the
“time-image.” To suggest this idea, however, is not only to suggest that \textit{Badlands} intervenes into the history of American genre cinema, but that it also contributes to the history of the concept of the time-image itself. We can begin to understand this idea by considering the first of the above three motifs, the uncertain journey, which for us marks a journey both through \textit{Badlands} as a film experience and the experience narrated within the story. The presence of this motif in Malick’s oeuvre testifies to the emergence of his films within the climate of the early 1970s, in which particular films refigured the manner in which the conventional hero’s journey in Hollywood was depicted.

In 1975, Thomas Elsaesser argued that certain Hollywood films – usually referred to as forming a body of work known historically as “New Hollywood cinema” – intervened in familiar classical paradigms, by combining the unmotivated hero and the motif of the journey, that is, the recourse on the one hand to motivation, ready-made, highly conventionalised, and brought to the film from the outside, and on the other, the lack of corresponding motivation on the inside, on the part of the protagonist’s inner drive or palpable conflict. On the part of the director (or the community he represents), this discrepancy would appear to correspond to a kind of malaise already frequently alluded to in relation to the European cinema: the fading confidence in being able to tell a story, with a beginning, a middle, and an ending.\textsuperscript{2}

With this observation, Elsaesser notes at once the external reliance of New Hollywood films on key narrative tropes from the past, and at the same time an internal resistance – from the site of both the character and the director – to investing the depiction of the
journey with the same ideological values of earlier American films. Christian Keathley has suggested that Elsaesser’s argument, written nearly a decade before Deleuze crafted his philosophy of cinema, anticipates Deleuze’s later philosophy of the time-image, insofar as New Hollywood films “explore a cinema predicated not on action, but on the possibilities inherent in the interval between perception and action. That is, art cinema privileges, expands, and explores the affection image.”

It is worth remembering, as Keathley goes on to point out, that the emergence of the time-image in America is precipitated, as in the Western European context thirty years earlier, by a historical crisis – war – “specifically, the traumatic experience of [the Vietnam] war.” Keathley argues that films such as Badlands were made in a cultural context especially fraught with both moral ambiguity and indecisiveness, and thus such films invited debate and dialogue rather than simple ideological assent.

The suggestion that a time-image emerges in Hollywood cinema in the early 1970s is itself a useful complication of the very argument of the philosopher who created the concept. In Deleuze’s terms, the historical splitting of the cinema of the time-image from the cinema of the movement-image occurs, most saliently, in postwar Italy, particularly with the films of Roberto Rossellini. Films such as Rome, Open City (1945) and Germany, Year Zero (1947), were made in a moment when the future of Italy and much of Europe was radically uncertain. Narrative situations, instead of finding resolution through the actions of protagonists who respond rationally to perceptions and affections in ways that could be justified in the name of nationhood, are instead short-circuited. As Deleuze himself writes, “in an ordinary or everyday situation, in the course
of a series of gestures, which are insignificant but all the more obedient to simple sensory-motor schemata, what has suddenly been brought about is a pure optical situation to which [the character] has no response or reaction."6 Responding to the world in the usual way no longer works, as the old norms of behavior, action, and rationality fall apart in the face of crisis. The first films of the time-image are thus structured around relatively aimless wandering and encountering, rather than goal-directed journeys, characterized by the young German boy’s overwhelming (and eventually tragic) perception of a war-torn Berlin that he is not able to comprehend in Rossellini’s Germany Year Zero.

Badlands, though, suggests that these concepts of the movement-image and the time-image, while useful, are not fully historicized. Deleuze locates the emergence of the time-image after World War II, and makes some effort at connecting the time-image to the moment of New Hollywood. However, for Deleuze, the American cinema, instead of being critically invigorated through an application of the time-image to its institution, finds its limits . . . the critique swerves abruptly and attacks only a misuse of apparatuses and institutions, in striving to save the remains of the American Dream, as in Lumet; or it extends itself, but becomes empty and starts to grate, as in Altman, content to parody the cliché imitated instead of giving birth to a new image. As Lawrence said about painting: the rage against clichés does not lead to much if it is content only to parody them; maltreated, mutilated, destroyed, a cliché is not slow to be reborn from the ashes.7
It is not clear what Deleuze thought of Malick, a director not discussed in either of the *Cinema* books. Deleuze suggests here that the filmmakers of New Hollywood did not pressure the thinking of the audience through an encounter with substantially new images. It is clear that for Deleuze parodies of old images result not in new thinking but in a paradoxical re-investment in the cliché critiqued. While I think Deleuze is clearly underestimating the importance of both Lumet and Altman in the passage cited above, we can give this salvo at the end of *Cinema 1* a more substantial response in relation to Malick’s work. Does American cinema in the early 1970s find any parallel with the films of postwar Europe thirty years previously, those films in which Deleuze situates the emergence of the time-image? And, if so, how does a film like *Badlands*, made within the Hollywood institution, respond to this situation by creating new kinds of images?

We can go some way towards answering these questions by noting that Deleuze elsewhere overestimates the extent to which postwar Italian film resulted in entirely new images. This is not to contest his central observation regarding the importance of neorealist cinema, but rather to reassert the importance of tradition and historical forms in the “break” Deleuze posits between neorealism and what came before. Although the importance of neorealism cannot be overestimated, like New Hollywood at the beginning of the 1970s, any new images generated in the cinema of Rossellini, De Sica, Visconti – and eventually Fellini, Antonioni, and the other new waves of the European art cinema – rested upon a thorough knowledge of classical cinema conventions. Thus, Deleuze is exaggerating the case severely when he writes that “all that was necessary was a new type of tale . . . capable of including the elliptical and the unorganised, as if the cinema
had to begin again from zero, questioning afresh all the accepted facts of the American tradition. The Italians were therefore able to have an intuitive consciousness of the new image in the course of being born."

Italian filmmakers did not simply intuit new images from out of nowhere. As Peter Brunette writes regarding *Rome, Open City* in his magisterial study of Roberto Rossellini (published one year after the first of Deleuze’s *Cinema* books was translated into English), “[W]hat is most striking is its overwhelming similarity to previous cinema,” in which “the characters are tightly intertwined for maximum efficiency…Exposition is accomplished instantly, in bold, swift strokes, and we are plunged into the narrative at a gallop from the first minute of the film.”

Brunette’s emphasis on Rossellini’s penchant for a documentary-like realism within the framework of a conventional narrative construction – an argument which parallels Kristin Thompson’s similar assertion, published one year later, about De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) – suggests the extent to which the Italian filmmakers relied upon classicism as a kind of enabling structure to assist in the creation of the historically viable new images which fleshed out that structure. This idea indicates their partial dependence upon a tradition within which they could pressure viewers to respond and think differently in relation to a changed historical situation.

Again, this discussion of Rossellini and neorealism in recent critical literature does not upend Deleuze’s notion of the newness of the time-image, or the way in which it pressures us to think differently. Rather, this critical reception of Rossellini forcefully speaks, more than Deleuze himself does, to how the time-image historically emerges out of the older automatisms of the movement-image, a facet of the art cinema which other
scholars have noted. Angelo Restivo’s study of postwar Italian cinema, for example, emphasizes the newness of neorealism while still acknowledging its indebtedness to earlier forms of cinematic practice. Restivo suggests – in terms which echo Deleuze and my own ideas regarding Malick’s narrative strategies in relation to character experience – that the characters in a film such as *Rome, Open City* in fact resist the forward movement of a history in which they do not always possess the power to control their futures, and thus the forward movement of the film’s own narrative. As Restivo writes regarding *Rome, Open City*’s narrative, “We could then argue that the occupying Nazis are setting the terms for a ‘master narrative’ (pun intended) and that the film’s depiction of the many acts of resistance (both small and large) to the imposition of this ‘narrative’ works as a kind of force of narrative dissolution within the film itself.”11 Here Restivo is linking the characters’ experiences – human beings responding to and resisting the imposition of an oppressive master narrative – to the spectator’s, pointing to the manner in which the political resistance of a character within the diegesis, and the desire of the character for an alternative history, fractures the spectator’s own sense of a narrative whole. What constitutes an authorized historical narrative is thus very much a contested issue in *Rome, Open City*, for the resistance of the characters challenges, within our own experience of the film, the viewer’s confidence in the resolution of the whole fabula on another. The final image of Rossellini’s film – a group of young boys walking into a landscape after the execution of Italian resistance fighters – gestures towards the future in a manner characteristic of the time-image, a property more fully explored in Rossellini’s postwar film *Germany, Year Zero*, in which formerly reliable forms of movement and
rationalization can no longer respond to the desolate postwar environment of Berlin. The emergence of the time-image in the fictional worlds of these films is thus motivated by a resistance to a sensory-motor schema (Fascism) and an authorized historical narrative which had grown more than intolerable. In this way, Fascism provides not only a master narrative for Rossellini’s characters to resist, but the director’s memory of their resistance (the film is made immediately after the end of the war), as well as his departure from certain enabling automatisms, also informs the structure of Rossellini’s film.

The emergence of the time-image in Rossellini is thus directly related to a history and culture informing the film’s production, reception, narrative structure, and its depiction of character actions. In *Badlands*, however, the behavior of the characters, interpretable perhaps as a resistance to society’s attempt to impinge upon their agency, operates with no consciously articulated, historically given master narrative against which they can establish their own histories, even if the film is itself crafted through Malick’s own knowledge of historical forms and counter-cultural attitudes emerging from late 1960s early 1970s in America. In other words, while a master narrative such as Vietnam may describe a point of resistance for the film itself, it cannot describe the narrative resisted by the characters within *Badlands*, who exist in a different historical time and who lack a consciously articulated master narrative against which they might have defined their actions. In *Badlands*, as one writer has put it, “the characters may be drawn to each other, not through a conscious desire to change or reinvent, but because neither of them has any clear sense of self in the first place.” Kit and Holly rebel, not necessarily without a cause (we can infer on our own possible causes of their actions as
we watch the film, even if they themselves cannot), but without an attendant signification that consciously justifies – within the diegesis – the ethical value of their actions. We can say that any conscious justification of their actions floats away in the red balloon.

If *Badlands* fits neither the mold of the time-image in neorealism nor the movement-image of the classical cinema it does still share aspects of both. Described abstractly, the plot of *Badlands* appears deceptively routine, the very stuff of the clichés Deleuze decries: A complete movement-image in which character perception and action results in narrative closure. To be sure, Holly’s own fascination with pulp fiction to some extent echoes the plot of the film she is in. But the manner in which Malick presents this plot to us suggests he is perhaps less interested in narrative than in the encounters and phenomena which challenge both his characters and his audience. Those open-ended phenomena – the “time-images” which Rossellini’s characters respond to in resistance to Fascism – are met by Kit and Holly without the same confident response. As we will see, in *Badlands* what Malick shows us are two characters who, in the course of their journey, encounter new spaces and phenomena (new, at least, relative to their familiar environments) but who remain, for the most part, unable to channel those experiences into substantial reasons justifying the violent responses that Kit, for his part, produces. If *Badlands* is a film about alienation, then, it is largely because a perceptual and cognitive gulf marks the space between what the camera and the filmmaker are at pains to show us of the world and what Kit and Holly are ready to understand. The achievement of the film, however, is that Malick does not simply distance us, in the Brechtian manner, from his characters in order to generate this difference. Admittedly, the power of our
immediate and sensual engagement with the filmed world of *Badlands* may often leave us incredulous at Kit and Holly’s own failure to respond to the world in as rich a way. Yet at the same time the film’s engagement with both Kit and Holly carries its own kind of power; if our responses to the open-ended images of the world in *Badlands* is often in contrast to that of the characters, we must never forget that Kit and Holly, as characters, are realized through the style of both the performers and Malick’s filmmaking, and are thus not only perceivers of time-images within the film but are also constitutive of the time-images which, taken together, comprise the film we perceive.

If in *Rome, Open City*, then, both character and viewer were encouraged to respond to the uncertainty in the world through one shared belief, in *Badlands* no such shared space of certain feeling exists. However, Kit and Holly still mark our experience of the film in a significant way. As William Johnson has written of the performances in *Badlands*, the film’s visual immediacy, which might seem to clash with the formal and narrative distancing of the film, in fact extends it. The viewer sees vividly but always at a distance. Just as Malick offers no psychological explanations to cloud our image of Kit and Holly, so he makes few attempts to involve us (melodramatically or kinesthetically) in their actions. Thus the killings are presented casually, without either the pathos or the cynicism that would be implied by a sudden recourse to slow motion, rapid cutting, or gory close-ups. The camera is never overtly subjective: while we share in Kit’s and Holly’s way of seeing the world, we remain outside them. In fact, *they* form part of the phenomena that challenge *us*.13
As Johnson suggests, for Malick distance and empathy are part of the same aesthetic strategy. While we are distanced from the characters through our sensitivity to phenomena they seem insensitive to, their very lack of concern also sparks in the viewer a desire to know more about the source of this blasé. This is, then, not empathy for psychologically rounded characters, nor psychological identification with their behavior. Following Johnson, Brian Henderson has suggested that this distance which produces empathy (and vice versa), the product in part of Malick’s stylistic technique, is also the result of performance style, wherein “Sheen and Spacek...[fill] the film with their interesting sounds and motions but never [resolve] into anything, never substantializing, defining, or ‘becoming’ characters.” Malick and his actors, through a set of poetic choices, avoid “suturing” the viewer into the psychological plenitude of most classical fictional characters, leaving both camera and viewer to perceive the fictional human agent from a distance, perhaps perceiving in their spaces more than the character can alone. In Badlands autonomy is granted to each element in the perceptual chain of cinema but Malick also picks privileged moments in which to draw viewers and characters closer to one another (even if in this first film we perhaps feel distance more often than closeness). As Malick himself has suggested, “I hope that the voiceover and the cinematography create some distance without alienating the viewer too much. They should distance you, and then make you participate, then distance you again, in a back-and-forth movement.” It is this back-and-forth movement – between an interest and empathy in character and their actions, on the one hand, and a more objective understanding of their situation on the other – which defines the work of the film.
The opening shot begins to suggest this dialectic between closeness and distance that recurs throughout *Badlands*. We see Holly sitting on her bed with her pet dog. On the soundtrack, her first voice-over begins to tell us of her past: that her father kept her parents’ wedding cake in the refrigerator for a decade (or “ten whole years,” as she endearingly tells us) prior to the death of her mother, and that he only threw it out upon burying his wife (“after the funeral he gave it to the yardman”). This bizarre detail seems significant, a clue to the character of the father (as is the subsequent detail, that the father “could never be consoled by the little stranger he found in his house,” the little stranger being Holly herself) and yet the viewer of *Badlands* will never know her father very well. Perhaps Holly herself lacks knowledge of her emotionally distant father; but at the very least we can say that it is difficult for us to know this exactly. Holly often remains an enigma to us and thus the precise meaning of her relationship with her father also remains opaque. In the opening shot, as Holly tells us of her past, Spacek herself does not betray, through any gesture, an inner emotion which might inflect the history relayed to us (and it is strange enough, indeed, that we would even have to look for other aspects of performance to grant upon the voice-over a feeling of interiority, given that this is precisely the function which the voice-over is most often called upon to enact). As the shot reaches its conclusion, it transforms itself, through a track-out, from a medium-shot into a long-shot, as if to emphasize further the already disconcerting mixture of intimacy and distance we have been given. As we see this image of the past (of a fifteen-year-old girl and her dog) both the voice-over and the camera remind us that we nonetheless do not quite know it. Holly’s past remains a question more than it remains a stable aspect of
the film’s dramaturgy, given that we remain at arm’s length from an understanding of her history. At the same time, the desire to understand more of this history is the product of Malick placing that character close enough for us to become interested; empathy in Badlands, as in much of Malick’s work, does not simply include understanding, but rather motivates one’s desire to understand.

As Johnson, Henderson, and Malick have all suggested above, and as this brief look at the first passage in the film implies, character action, and the style of the actor’s performance in conveying that action, does not convey a whole psychological clarity and causality – a complete “person” with a plenitude of complexity and interiority – even if we occasionally get a glimpse of character emotion and intentionality that gestures towards complexity. These “glimpses” in Malick’s film (of which Holly’s introduction of herself in the film’s opening sequence is only one) remind us that his characters are not finalized entities which we can conceptually take complete hold of; those privileged moments in which we understand, however briefly, something of a character’s emotional or intellectual makeup reminds us of their own continually ongoing becomings as subjects (this idea of a subjective becoming in Badlands is often felt as almost completely unrealized potential). This relative degree of opacity generates the kind of “visual immediacy” which Johnson noted earlier.

If we cannot grasp characters as whole psychological entities, and if, likewise, we do not understand everything in the film world through the prism of that psychology, we might characterize our experience of the film as happening alongside, rather than “with,” them, for the filmmaker’s presentation of what we see is always marked by a salient
difference relative to the character’s own apprehension of and action within the diegetic world. If this is potentially true of all films, it is a truth Malick’s films openly acknowledge and use as a poetic resource, in that our experience of narrative space in the case of *Badlands* often leads us to knowledge that the characters cannot quite seem to access. Before exploring this idea in a further reading of specific scenes, I would like to frame this contrapuntal encounter with the film’s spaces through a philosopher familiar to Malick studies, but whose concepts might still be put into dialogue with Malick in creative new ways. An essay by Heidegger entitled “Building Dwelling Thinking” can help us interrogate what, precisely, we may infer Malick’s characters are attempting to find in their journey, and how we as viewers encounter these spaces and the characters within them. For Heidegger, the concept of dwelling is closely related to building a productive, thoughtful historical existence, one that establishes space so that the subject can become across time. For my own purposes, I will consider dwelling in this sense as both what the characters within Malick’s films seek (even if they are not conscious of the fact) and what the films themselves, in another sense, provide to their receptive viewers.

Dwelling “involves the transcendence of an entity that can ask about what is beyond the horizons of its finitude,” as Marc Furstenau and Leslie MacAvoy have written.\(^\text{16}\) Transcendence here refers not to an escape from one’s historical or social embodiment, or an omniscient mastery of existence that disavows one’s place in history. Heidegger’s sense of transcendence is rather more productive, and it is tied directly into the establishment of our historical existence on earth. The philosopher himself puts the concept, and its relationship to acts of human meaning-making, this way:
Building and thinking are, each in its own way, inescapable for dwelling. The two, however, are also insufficient for dwelling so long as each busies itself with its own affairs in separation instead of listening to one another. They are able to listen if both – building and thinking – belong to dwelling, if they remain within their limits and realize that the one as much as the other comes from the workshop of long experience and incessant practice.¹⁷

Heidegger shows us that building a concrete historical existence in and across time is a matter of establishing a space in which one may productively act, think, and intend towards the social world. The point is to build a space not wholly predetermined but one built to be transcended – one with the necessary openness to allow engagement with spaces outside in ways that are productive and dialogic. Heidegger stresses that dwelling is not the same as building (if it were, our existing buildings would be sufficient dwelling-spots; the philosopher is pointing to a social malaise, a lack of true dwelling, and this lack resonates within Badlands). Heidegger’s thinking is here against the potential atomization of the individual in modernity, pressuring the human subject to realize the extent to which it must be able to ask “what is beyond the horizons of its finitude,” that is, to realize its potential to engage in valuable social relations. But both building and thinking are “insufficient for dwelling” – suggesting that many of the buildings and concepts we wield – or are made to wield – in everyday life are not in fact suitable for this productive social existence.

Heidegger’s concept of dwelling is useful when put into dialogue with Malick’s work precisely because it leads us to an explanation of transcendence as an historical
phenomenon, that is, desired in particular contexts for particular reasons that are, at least initially, historically contingent. In *The Thin Red Line*, for example, Witt goes AWOL to live in nature and be with the Melanesian natives, a decision related at least in part to his experience in the war. In *Badlands* neither Kit nor Holly are able to articulate, or realize, this desire for transcendence as well as Witt does, although their very journey suggests a search for the sort of conditions where desire, and its realization, may find firm ground. This notion of dwelling, sought though rarely found by Malick’s characters, can then be concretely understood as a dialectical and embodied phenomenology of human agency, and as such a phenomenology which includes the human agent’s need for an extension of the individual self into the larger social sphere (implicit also in the close relationship in the German language between the words Heidegger uses for “dwell” and “neighbor”). Dwelling enables productive human action and the establishment of a human identity in space through that action at a particular moment in history, or a kind of “transcendence-in-immanence.” This is not a transcendence of earth or society but rather a lifelong attempt to actively and usefully extend one’s experience beyond what is immediately given in an individual’s embodied situation, to continue to plunge into and understand what is initially invisible and not understood (and, thus, to establish a place of living which enables that very engagement with the invisible to happen).

What Malick’s characters desire in a dwelling is, again, not suggested to us through conventional cinematic means of conveying character in psychological terms. Malick rather poetically implies this search for a dwelling through the viewer’s perceptual engagements with the films themselves, and particularly through the
difference marking the space between our experiences of the film and the characters’
experience of the diegetic world. This idea can be advanced through a brief return to
Sobchack’s phenomenology, which discusses human agency in the perception of filmic
space in terms that recall Heidegger’s concept of dwelling:

These dynamic and dialectical relations between the visible and invisible in visual
experience articulate the cooperative and reversible nature of the immanent (what
is directly given in and as existential experience) and the transcendent (what is
indirectly taken from and as existential experience) . . . the invisible is hardly
transcendental, even if it is always ambiguous and mysterious in its transcendence
of vision and visibility. Its mystery, however, is solved again and again in acts of
perception – although, paradoxically, its transcendence both of and within any
single act and work of visual perception demands that it be continually re-solved.
Indeed, therein lies the mystery. But it is a mystery that is experienced daily by
the lived-body being in the world. Not transcendental and beyond existence, the
invisible is a transcendence of immanence in immanence. It is directly
experienced by us as that which we cannot directly experience wholly or merely
through sight. Thus, the visible and the invisible in-form each other,
chiasmatically reversing and exchanging themselves in our most common acts of
perception and expression.¹⁸
To “dwell” as a spectator is to thus establish a space of viewing and expressing in which
one can begin to transcend what is immediately immanent, to ask questions of the world
and begin to craft intentional projects through which one might be able to answer them
(and discover still further questions). The idea that Malick’s films encourage philosophizing is one way of expressing the idea that his work functions as one enabling site for dwelling for us, where dwelling functions as an immediate surrounding enabling the discovery of a transcendent realm beyond that immediacy. Dwelling exists, then, as a concept available for film practice, and thus a way of filmmaking, that is, the creation of enabling ground for future perceptions and expressions (and here Heidegger’s notion of dwelling is closely related to the open-endedness of the Deleuzian time-image).

This kind of dwelling is posited as a way to avoid the more common human act of *enframing*, which achieves exactly the opposite of dwelling, and which also has certain parallels within the cinematic institution (in particular films that attempt to pre-digest our experience for us in advance, whether this be the most routine Hollywood films or overbearing and didactic political films, such as the ones Godard made in the 1970s). Instead of establishing a space in which the human being may both preserve and become, enframing – or disciplining – is an attempt at mastering the world once and for all, “a making-stand-over-against, an objectifying that goes forward and masters.”¹⁹ The instrumental and disciplining logic of human social systems (for example, capitalism and its often destructive use of technology) does not prepare adequate ground for the kind of dwelling Heidegger here envisions; instead, technology is used to master and rationalize space, rather than preserving its productive, enabling ground. If Malick’s film provides us with the ground for thoughtful dwelling – an immediate experience encouraging thinking through time – clearly this is what Holly and Kit in turn lack. Kit and Holly’s journey in *Badlands* might be understood as a series of smaller trajectories, from interstitial,
marginal spaces (such as the back alleys in which Kit wanders early in the film) in which the characters seek relief from their disciplined inscription within society, but which offer no kind of permanently productive dwelling, to spaces in which the two of them attempt to establish a kind of dwelling that, within the film’s atmosphere of existential malaise, ultimately fails. As Neil Campbell has suggested, both Kit and Holly are initially confined within already encoded spaces that preemptively delimit how they may construct their identities and thus what they may become, a range of places including “the domestic house, the suburb, the school, and the workplace,” which in Badlands takes the form of “the circling shots around [Holly’s] bed in the opening scene, to [Kit’s] work at the feed lot penning cattle, to the traps and cages that echo throughout the film, including one taken from the father’s house and another at Cato’s where he also keeps a spider in a bottle.” These kinds of heavily coded spaces are precisely what oppose Heidegger’s sense of open-ended, productive, communal dwelling.

Codified spaces and experiences are especially prevalent in the first act of the film, prior to the beginning of Kit and Holly’s journey. In the very first image in which she appears, Holly is in her bedroom, which increasingly becomes the scene of her memory, abandoned after the death of her father later in the film. She is expected, however, to fulfill a certain kind of femininity originating in this domestic sphere, figured first in the baton she twirls in the streets before Kit meets her (playacting here as a cheerleader) and elsewhere fulfilling her dutiful role as a daughter when she initially rejects Kit’s advances by suggesting that his career as a trash collector would not be good enough for her father. Later, after Kit and Holly make love for the first time, Holly seems
less personally fulfilled than simply fulfilling a role expected of her, and relieved that her
virginity has finally been taken from her. She says to Kit that she thought she “might die
before it happened” (and her inability to bluntly describe “it” as sex is one sign of the
disjunction which exists between her physical existence and her cognition). Her
relationship with her embodied experience here is reduced to a role that her body is
expected to fulfill, not an experience that might fulfill her body (or soul). Kit’s
workplace, meanwhile, is first a garbage truck and, then, a feedlot, and both are shown
(and, in the screeching of the truck and the machinery on the feedlot, heard) as
disharmonious with the landscapes against which they are figured. The fact that Kit
abandons both jobs early on suggests the failure of either to fulfill him, even if he cannot
justify his abandonment from these workplaces in the same terms. Kit’s presence in the
unemployment office, too – in which his posture is echoed in the figures of several other
unemployed males sitting in the waiting room around him – suggests he is merely a cog
in an unsatisfying social framework, rather than one of its active, dialogical participants.

The instrumental roles characters are made to play within these spaces are felt less
within Malick’s own filming of the spaces (which are often made strange through the
way in which Malick films them as in, for example, the burning of Holly’s father’s home,
which is rendered in a series of evocative close-ups and set to non-diegetic choral music)
and much more through the way characters are shown to create signs that in turn
reproduce codes. It is easy enough to see this idea through the clichés from popular
culture that constitute much of Holly’s voice-over narration, but Malick shows how
social meaning covertly reproduces itself within other types of constructions as well.
When Kit approaches Holly’s father for the first time, for example, the latter is shown painting a large image of a landscape on a billboard, one whose mixture of a Midwest agrarian landscape, farm labor, and a domestic family scene strangely echoes the kinds of milieu depicted within Malick’s own film. This billboard functions simultaneously as both a vivid aspect of *Badlands*’ cinematography (the bright green, blue, and brown colors of the billboard echo directly the same colors seen elsewhere in Malick’s image), reflexively standing against the skyline almost like a drive-in movie screen, as Lloyd Michaels has also pointed out.\(^{21}\) As vibrant as it is to us, however, this billboard appears to be a completely normal aspect of the characters’ lives, not remarked upon or betraying, for them, any further significance beyond the livestock feed it advertises. The viewer of *Badlands* is more likely to view this image as precisely what it is, that is, a construction, and in this case an incomplete one, given that one of the bottom panels in the billboard is missing. For us, this image may further echo Holly’s voice-over narration, in that like her commentary, this billboard image, while apparently regarded as so much a part of a natural world, is clearly unfinished and still open to further acts of creation, and is not merely a code to be reproduced, even if the characters view it that way.

If such spaces, as filmed by their director, give Malick’s viewer pause to consider, the same spaces do not seem to allow characters the space and time in which to think, or the chance to establish their own historical narrative through which they might resist the social situations in which they have been inscribed. As a result, both Kit and Holly – prior to beginning their murderous journey through the badlands – attempt to achieve some respite by absconding to spaces that exist apart from the kinds of codified spaces
represented in her father’s painting. Each of these spaces, however, ultimately fails as a productive dwelling for the characters. After burning down Holly’s home, for example, they attempt to establish an existence free from the disciplining strictures of human society in the woods. They are unable, though, to free themselves from the trappings of normalized domesticity, even as Malick’s own camera in these same passages suggests the possibility of sensitivity to the nature around them. For a moment, it appears the woods will offer the kind of fulfilling, embodied engagement with the world that the previous spaces could not offer them. Kit, for example, is directly involved with the landscape through his attempts to forage for food, and as Kit and Holly sit and speak to one another in the trees we get an image of two humans engaging with nature that is certainly in counterpoint to the unsatisfying experiences with technology Kit is shown to have early in the film. Yet this intimate relationship with the landscape soon gives way, again, to distance; after a repeated failure to catch a fish in the stream, for example, Kit starts comically firing at them with his gun, abandoning a close, tactile relationship with the environment in favor of a distanced and more destructive one. Indeed, these gunshots are overheard and authorities chase Kit and Holly out of the woods, permanently ending this brief sojourn with nature.

Perhaps we should have known that this “intimate” connection with nature was bound to failure. During their earlier picnic by a stream, Holly comments on the beauty of the landscape, saying that the flowers are too pretty to pick. She would, in other words, prefer to remain the landscape before her as a still picture, rather than tactiley engaging with it. This refusal to become and expand one’s subjectivity through an experience (in
this case, of nature) is seen again in the later sequence in the woods. While there, Holly and Kit fail in their first attempt to build a dwelling precisely because their “adventurous” life in the woods reinscribes the domestic patterns which gave them no fulfillment before. While sitting in a field of grass, Holly puts make-up on for apparently the first time; Kit acts as the breadwinner as he forages for food; at one moment, he is shown reading National Geographic while sitting in a tree, suggesting that his ways of being in nature have been predigested by the artifacts of his culture. It becomes significant then, in retrospect, that the burning of Holly’s father’s home – which might at first be validly read as an abandonment of the patriarchal authority which has hitherto defined Holly’s existence – is later felt as a loss. While close-ups of domestic objects ablaze, such as a miniature doll house and dolls, initially frame Holly’s departure as liberating, what we see is also the destruction of everything she has hitherto known. This home, and the innocence lost along with it, is the first of Malick’s “paradises lost” (which we will see recur in the burning of the farmland in Days of Heaven, the destruction of Guadalcanal in World War II in The Thin Red Line, and early, pre-colonial America itself in The New World), and it is significant that the paradise lost here only seems a paradise once it is in flames, that is, once it can be fictionalized, nostalgically, as a past that never authentically existed. It is significant, then, that so many of the locations Holly and Kit encounter bear the residue of the “paradises” they had only apparently left behind.

The things that characters hold onto from their pasts represents not an authentic relationship with their histories, but rather a fantasy of innocence – an idealization of the disciplinary spaces which they have fled, and whose fleeing should be liberating – is
reflected also in their behavior, which often suggests a yearning for an earlier, “simpler”
time. “Kit may shoot his only friend, Cato, in the back,” Lloyd Michaels, exploring the
theme of nostalgia in the film, writes, “but he politely holds the screen door open for him
and, along with Holly, engages the dying man in small talk. No hard feelings, he seems to
say.” Kit’s behavior here is not simply naïveté; it is a refusal to respond to the open-
ended world they encounter in the landscapes of the Midwest with responses that
acknowledges the facts of their immediate existence. This conservative attitude towards
the past – the idea that it constitutes not a field to be continually reinvested with
contemporary significance, but rather a body of knowledge to be held onto as if it were a
lost Eden – introduces into the film a certain repetition, beginning with the sequence in
the woods, wherein new spaces unencumbered, at least at first glance, by the disciplinary
codification characterizing the locations from which the characters have fled fail to give
rise to new relationships that might point to a way out of their murderous trajectory.

For example, this second space they encounter on their journey, Cato’s shack,
offers no kind of productive shelter. The expanse of the Dakota badlands surrounding the
shack, signifying perhaps a freedom from the work which has defined both Kit and
Cato’s existence, is betrayed by the contents of Cato’s home, consisting of detritus and
knick-knacks picked up on the garbage route, reminiscent of the disciplined space of the
work which Kit has fled, offering no new kind of social productivity. A clear
socioeconomic divide also separates Kit and Holly from the rich man’s house seen later
in the film. As she wanders outside the rich man’s estate, Holly’s voice-over betrays a
lack of direct, tactile engagement with the world around her; it is the most alienated (and potentially alienating) voice-over in the film:

I left Kit in the parlor and went for a stroll outside the house. The day was quiet and serene, but I didn’t notice, for I was deep in thought. Not even thinkin’ about how to slip off. The world was like a faraway planet to which I could never return. I thought what a fine place it was – full of things that people can look into and enjoy.

Beyond the apparent banality of the voice-over in this instance, it suggests, at least, that Holly notices on her walk a world as it presents itself to the senses: a world “full of things to enjoy,” “quiet and serene.” Yet despite these observations, Holly remains detached from the world as from us, standing against space like a figure in a static tableau (she has perhaps become one of the pretty, still flowers she earlier observed) rather than engaging with and moving through it dynamically, thus achieving nothing like dwelling in the Heidegerrian sense while on this estate or in nearly any other of the film’s locations. Although noting that the day was “quiet and serene,” she strangely contradicts herself – in fact, renders the first part of the statement nonsensical – by then suggesting that she “didn’t notice.” Remarking upon all the “things that people can look into and enjoy,” Holly – far from engaging with these things in a direct, haptic, tactile fashion, as protagonists in later Malick films will be shown to do, registers her distance from those very same things by noting that the world appears to her “like a faraway planet.”

Even the apparently open-ended landscape of the badlands near the film’s end seems to connote constriction as much as freedom. Although the badlands are a
magnificently undisciplined space – especially at sunset, the beauty of the landscape brushes up against the sublime, at least relative to the quotidian trappings of the milieu familiar through the rest of the film – Holly and Kit can never settle there, for to do so will be to give up the chase and be caught by the law, the only force which has propelled their journey and given it significance. Malick represents this idea filmically, too, repeatedly framing Kit and Holly against the landscapes of the badlands and the woods through the use of a telephoto lens. This stylistic choice throws their surroundings out of focus, distorting rather than cementing relationships between character and environment. Lacking, too, the relationships to history and their historical selves which inform the behavior of characters in Rossellini’s cinema of the time-image, and inscribed in heavily disciplined and encoded spaces, Kit and Holly are equally unable to establish their own alternative histories in the spaces in which they attempt to dwell. If in classical cinema, characters are eventually seem to have “taken over the narration,” as David Bordwell phrases it, through the way they inhabit space and establish their projects within it, space in Badlands instead often appears to act against, and take over, the characters, given that they are ultimately unable to establish a productive existence within it. Their journey, then, is the search for a dwelling wherein their historical selves and their relationship to the social world might become more fully. Their failure to establish such histories needs to be interrogated further, however, for it is not simply an individual failure. A wider malaise is at work within the world of Badlands, one unconsciously motivating the entire trajectory of their journey. We can deepen this discussion of the journey by linking it to the break between characters and landscapes, exploring how
Malick’s characters in *Badlands* fail to make historical meaning in their fictional worlds and, just as significantly, the manner in which Malick films this disjunction.

**Missing Revelations: The Elusiveness of Objects and the Disavowal of History**

The previous section has suggested that potential encounters with new phenomena – such as the expansive badlands of the film’s title – are not productive for the characters. Key to the Deleuzian time-image is the idea of a new confrontation between a subject and an object, one which throws previously obtaining characteristics of the perceiving subject out of joint. The subject, far from simply confirming a preexisting idea through the experience of an object or an event, sees his or her subjective situation and intentional projects cleaved from the initial site of psychological intention and thrown into a state of becoming and change. It is worth remembering that Deleuze describes the time-image as “a cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent,” in which objects are no longer, as in the regime of the movement-image, directly and immediately used by characters as instruments in order to accomplish goals. To further explore how this becoming and change, initiated by a sensual and haptic confrontation between the subject and the object, a confrontation which refigures both, is dealt with – or, as I have already suggested in regards to its characters, not dealt with – in *Badlands*, we first need to think through how Malick presents relationships between humans and landscapes. More specifically, we will need to consider how Malick photographs and narrativizes the presence of objects, and the relationship of these objects to both the viewer and the character.
In this line of inquiry, one cannot escape the history of the director’s critical reception, and thus is immediately reminded of Stanley Cavell, Malick’s former teacher, whose viewing of *Days of Heaven* sparked a now-classical rumination on the role and character of the filmed object in the phenomena of motion pictures. Cavell writes:

[Malick has] discovered, or discovered how to acknowledge, a fundamental fact of film’s photographic basis: that objects participate in the photographic presence of themselves; they participate in the re-creation of themselves on film; they are essential in the making of their appearances. Objects projected on a screen are inherently reflexive, they occur as self-referential, reflecting upon their physical origins. Their presence refers to their absence, their location in another place. Then if in relation to objects capable of such self-manifestation human beings are reduced in significance, or crushed by the fact of beauty left vacant, perhaps this is because in trying to take dominion over the world, or in aestheticizing it (temptations inherent in the making of any film, or of any art), they are refusing their participation with it.26

Cavell’s insistence on a close, nearly metaphysical relationship between the instrument of recording in cinema and what is recorded by it evokes André Bazin and his repeated insistence on the close bond between cinema and the object filmed. What is specifically valued by Bazin’s realism – predicated on an aesthetic context which privileges non-disruptive editing, long shots and a long duration of shots allowing the spectator time to contemplate a “full” image and preserving the ambiguity inherent in any intentional engagement with reality – seems, at least at first sight, valued by Malick, given the
director’s tendency to let shots of landscapes linger just long enough for the viewer to engage them.

For both Cavell and Bazin, I would suggest, the filmed object, when allowed to participate in the constitution of images, operates relatively autonomously from the narrative patterns into which it is stitched. Given each critic’s interest in the classical cinema, this certainly does not mean that the object in classical films can never be Cavellian (or Bazinian), or that in post-classical films the object is irrelevant to the narrative which it accompanies. Instead, it suggests two tendencies. The cinema of the movement-image tends to situate the filmed object within a unified narrative form and style, and the participation of the indexically captured object is ultimately tethered to the intentional project of a character. Nonetheless, in what we can call “Cavellian” films in this regime, the object is still felt as a curious presence; it is an active participant in these projects, as the film’s vivid representation of reality and human activity within that reality is moving and convincing. In the cinema of the time-image, meanwhile, the filmed object’s relationship to narrative tends to loosen, and the object begins to pressure thinking in a way that throws it productively out of joint with the narrative development as a whole, to the extent that it can begin to function contrapuntally. In both regimes of the image, however, to understand objects as “capable of such self-manifestation” is to understand them as potentially painterly or, perhaps even better, musical, in either harmonizing with the projects, goals, and causality of the diegetic world (as in the best cinema of the movement-image, for example Hitchcock’s films, in which key objects frequently become powerful visual motifs and crucial aspects of linear, causal narrative),
or in posing destabilizing counterpoints which might prompt us to think through, to “listen” to the visual organization of that world in different ways (as in the time-image).

Writing his revised introduction to *The World Viewed* in 1979, Cavell does not say why he discusses *Days of Heaven* but does not discuss *Badlands*. However, there may be a significant reason for its exclusion. What is striking about *Badlands* is that many of its images of objects – and, further, its images of relationships between subjects and objects – are disharmonious depictions wherein the potential significance of an encountered object, or time-image, eludes the perception, thinking, and activity of the characters. James Morrison and Thomas Schur have pointed out that in *Badlands* “Malick seems to want every object to pivot among the available categories, without settling into any one of them. That indeterminacy, it seems, might save them.”

For a director insistent, in his three subsequent films, on both the sensuous presentation of narrative space and the character’s heightened, embodied sensitivity and response to the challenge of objects in that space, the frequent effacement of this relationship in *Badlands* – the sense that the object’s participation in the experience of the characters is either muted or indistinct, or even destructive – is a remarkable fact.

There are, of course, some objects which seem firmly situated in their expected places, and perform a function that is not especially revealing in a Cavellian, Bazinian or any other kind of significant sense, and this idea echoes the discussion of disciplinary space in the previous section. Holly’s baton, which she twirls in the streets of Fort Dupree early in the film, is (blandly) harmonious with the image of middle-class, Midwestern femininity which she here projects. But there are many orders of objects in
Badlands, and some of the more intriguing and open-ended ones hover around two categories that eventually collapse into one: detritus (especially early in the film) and the category of the living, sentient being slowly becoming an object (through death). When characters in the film happen upon one of these intriguing, unexpected, disturbing or startling objects, they cannot seem to invest in them a clearly articulated use-value, meaning, or response that might productively extend both the self and the object into the social world.

Kit certainly tries to find value in the various objects he encounters while on his garbage route: a dead dog (which he oddly attempts to “sell” to Cato, his co-worker on the garbage route); an old pair of shoes he attempts to pawn off on an old man; a discarded fudge bar that he (only half-jokingly) offers Holly as they sit with one another under the high school football field’s bleachers. Failing in his effort to find practical new uses for these objects, Kit usually attempts, with comic effect, to sell them (or in the case of the fudge bar, to offer it to Holly in the absence of a gift), making an absurd effort to re-place them in the circuit of exchange. This vision is hardly one of a harmonious, practical world in which objects serve particular functions, nor is the object challenging thought in a new way, for Kit’s repeated attempts to dig himself out of a desperate socioeconomic situation are met with refusals or equally absurd responses. Instead, these objects are seen to be thrown out of any productive relationship with the subject that attempts to wield them. Here a potentially meaningful relationship to the strange phenomena characters confront in the cinema of the time-image emerges in Badlands, but it is unrealized. In this strange, excessive obsession with detritus (certainly not a
requirement for his job as a trash collector), Kit is willing to touch and acknowledge what others have discarded and disavowed. Kit’s relationship with discarded objects thus suggests that he has a desire to in some way begin to connect with the world through his own embodied experience. Despite this, the disjunction between his tactile experience and any significant cognition is clear: After Kit points out a dead dog to Cato, for example, as a “dead collie,” Cato remarks that he doesn’t think the dog is in fact a collie, throwing a question mark around even this admittedly low level of significance Kit had once apparently succeeded in attributing to the dog.

Even the apparent exceptions to these disjointed relationships between subjects and objects are filmed by Malick so as to give the impression of an underlying malaise. In the sequences depicting Kit’s brief employment in the feedlot, for example, he assists in feeding the steers pills, a process that involves trapping the head of the animal in a machine before the pill can be inserted. At first glance, the operation of the machinery he wields appears to be effective. Yet Malick shoots the sequence without an establishing shot (that might give our apperception of the setting and the humans figured within it a kind of Bazinian wholeness) and instead favors a series of closer angles, beginning the sequence with a rather unsettling close-up of a steer about to be forced into the machinery. In approaching the scene in this way, Malick, through a series of close shots, fragments Kit’s relationship with the machinery so as never to show him, in a single shot, in a harmonious or productive relationship with it. (Kit’s uneasy relationship with the machine, in fact, appears to parallel the animal’s own marked discomfort).
Many of the objects Kit encounters, neither inscribing him as a narrative agent in a harmonious and causal plot nor sparking his own open-ended becoming as a finite subject in the historical world, instead suggest a feeling of gradual decay and entropy without the acquisition of value or meaning. A number of steers in the feedlot, for example, are either sick or dead; in one oddly comical shot Kit, rather than attempting to deal with the animal’s death in a dignified way, instead steps on it, and in another a steer is shown writhing on the ground, with no one attending to its sickness. These prefigure the images of death Kit himself will produce as a serial killer in the final hour of the film, but are also echoed by other, more unusual motifs of entropy Malick later shows us, including a football Kit discards after shooting it with a gun. As Lloyd Michaels has written, “the visual association” between Kit and these images of death and discarded garbage “reflects the entropy that has overcome him and that culminates when he shoots the tire of his getaway car before surrendering.”28 If the gradual entropy of the film print through which we experience cinema is felt also as a productive marker of our historical becoming and thinking through time, for Kit such entropy is precisely the reverse, a regressive failure to make meaning through contingent encounters with other objects and subjects.

This disharmony between subject and object ultimately results, of course, not only in regression but also in Kit’s destructive tendencies. We can infer that Kit’s ultimate inability to establish a meaningful connection between his own embodied experience and the phenomena in the world surrounding him is one of the motivations (albeit hardly one of which he is consciously aware) for his later turn to violence. After making love with
Holly for the first time, for example, Kit suggests the two of them smash their hands with a rock in order to memorialize the day. (Perhaps this idea is to make up for the unsatisfying sex; that neither one of them seems fulfilled recalls the theme of male impotence in *Bonnie and Clyde*). Holly understandably reacts in horror at his suggestion. Kit’s yearning for a substantial memorial of his fleeting experiences takes the form not of signification but of physical violence even in this early scene, prefiguring the murders he later commits. The murders themselves are, then, an extension of this desire to smash his hand with a rock, for murder is, of course, a (brutal) form of sensuous engagement with the world, substituting for the lack of sensuous and intellectual engagement Kit otherwise feels: at once intimately involved with another subject, the firing of a gun on another human being is also the enactment of a violent and final distance from that same subject.

Despite this unproductively entropic state of being which Kit leads, there is something nevertheless new and dynamic about his journey in *Badlands*. However, his response to these new phenomena in every instance suggests regression rather than becoming. The gun is, of course, also an object serving as Kit’s iconic link to the classical anti-heroes of film noir and other varieties of crime cinema, and thus for us as viewers it is familiar. For Kit, however, it is a new object. It is used without confidence or meaning; as an anti-hero, Kit is often hesitant to kill or is uncertain as to why he has used his gun in the first place, or how he might respond to the situation as it has changed as a result of him using it. Before he kills Holly’s father, Kit confronts him with the gun, saying, “Suppose I shot you. How’d that be?” At once a rebellious pose, Kit’s question is also an honest one, for it is clear from the sequence he has never fired a gun before.
“Want to hear what it sounds like?” Kit then asks, firing the gun into the floor, and again it is clear Kit is doing this for his own sake as much as Holly’s father’s own. Indeed, after killing her father Kit physically doesn’t know how to react: as her father lies on the ground dying, Kit jerkily adjusts his body after this startling experience, and Sheen’s awkward movements here suggest Kit’s own awkward transformation in embodiment after this experience. It also suggests that much of what follows will for Kit as for Sheen be a performance, not so much a rebellion but as a miming of the role of the rebel, an attempt to feel what it is to be a Dean-like figure. This is as much as we can read into Kit’s psychology and the personal meaning of his experience, however, for Kit’s use of the gun results not in resolved action but rather only in more time-images, more startling phenomena to which he is unable to respond meaningfully. Throughout the film, an image of death often lingers: Kit and Holly pace around the house with the dead body of her father, unsure what to do next, and as often happens after Kit kills another character, when Kit quickly glances at the dead body, he then just as quickly looks away, disavowing the existence of Holly’s father’s body through this glance away; Kit paces back and forth nervously after shooting Cato (and we are unsure if this is because he is nervous or appears so because he is simply overwhelmed by what he has just done); he hides the young couple who arrive at Cato’s home in a shed before he shoots at them, and then refuses to see if he has managed to kill them.

Given this divide, within the diegesis, between the meaningful implementation of an object by a subject, and the failure for characters to respond to the challenges objects sometimes pose to them or the consequences of their use, the failure of the subjects in the
film to become results also in the failure of objects in the film to participate in a “filmic becoming,” in the Cavellian sense. Visual motifs gradually accrue, of course. For example, five dogs, in six appearances, appear throughout the film, including Holly’s dog (twice), the dead dog Kit encounters on the garbage route, a dog to which Kit throws a piece of garbage, the dog owned by Kit’s former boss (these four are all seen in the first half of the film), and the dog seen outside the rich man’s home (in the second half of the film). This last dog tells us something of the failure of the characters to locate in this motif patterning their world a larger meaning. The rich man’s dog, seen briefly in a shot Malick cuts to while Holly strolls around the estate, is part of a landscape neither Holly nor Kit truly engages with; it functions, as Lloyd Michaels has suggested, as only “a reminder of the world the couple has left behind,” and then only for the viewer who actively notices it, for the characters fail to see it and use it as an opportunity to contemplate their past experience. Repeated images in Badlands then do not so much accrue a single thematic significance as they remind us of the failure characters experience in trying to generate such significance, to connect meaningfully with their histories as the film progresses. The extent of Malick’s commitment to a Cavellian aesthetic, then – and its concomitant obligation to allow the world to reveal, through the film object and autonomously from the manipulation of the filmmaker, phenomena to the subject, pregnant with meaning – brushes up against a cold world in Badlands in which little that is of productive use is revealed between subjects and the objects they wield. A Cavellian, or Bazinian, moment of revelation – in which the purpose of a filmed object is divined through the contemplation of the viewing subject – is, despite Malick’s
commitment to longer takes and general absence of manipulative editing, a distressing impossibility within the fictional world of *Badlands*, and at times it is denied us just as it is denied within the experience of the characters filmed.\(^\text{30}\)

Despite this disharmonious relationship with the world, the time capsules mentioned earlier in this chapter do suggest a desire on both Kit and Holly’s part to mark their experience in the world. Yet do these objects ultimately *reveal* anything of significance to them? That one has been launched above them in the air, and the other buried in the ground, suggests any revelation remains distant from Kit and Holly. This is suggested in other types of time capsules which Kit leaves throughout the film as well, further signs of his frustrated and unrealized desire to preserve some semblance of personal meaning in the world. After the murder of Holly’s father, for example, Kit begins to record his own thoughts through a dictaphone, and in the case of the first murder, he leaves behind the recording at the scene of the crime. (That Kit has very little to say about his past is clear, for he has trouble filling up the allotted one minute of time he has purchased from the recording machine; time throughout *Badlands* is something the characters are pressured to fill with significance, and Kit is clearly unable to accomplish this). Although initially his recording serves the practical purpose of simply distracting the police with misinformation, the fact that Kit continues to record his thoughts without such a motivation suggests he is in fact saving them for posterity.

Kit is aware of what the viewer elsewhere realizes through the film’s fatalistic narrative structure: that he will eventually be caught, and that he doesn’t have much time left. His desire for self-preservation through media and other artifacts (such as the
miniature stone statue he builds out of pebbles before he is caught by the police in Montana in the last act of the film), even in the face of the destruction of others which he willfully commits, evokes Bazin’s notion of the “mummy complex”: a desire for preservation of the self through the implements of culture, which in “providing a defense against the passage of time it satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time. To preserve, artificially…is to snatch [the body] from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life.”

In one sense, then, the recordings and memorials Kit leaves behind attest to his presence on the earth and thus speak to the same kind of need to preserve; failing to find a dwelling in which he can establish his own history, and failing to engage with other subjects, these recordings function as surrogates, speaking to a need on his part to find redemption not through a productive engagement with objects, but through the creation of more objects that might inform others of his history.

But like all histories, Kit’s is selective. As Philip Rosen has suggested, in his discussion of the desire for preservation in Bazinian aesthetics, a perfect preservation of the past is the object of an impossible desire, precisely because a full preservation of history would ensure “no room for our own world of the present.” As Kit and Holly stroll along the streets of Fort Dupree early in the film, they encounter a piece of garbage which Kit kicks aside, commenting that if everyone threw their garbage away “there would be no room to walk.” Kit, like Rosen, would seem to understand that history is enabled precisely through discarding, for not everything can be kept, but he parodies this idea through his own attempts at history that are selective to a fault. Kit’s attempt to
preserve a historical self is notable for what it doesn’t include: In recording his thoughts regarding his first murder, Kit records a fiction to throw the police off the scent, stating that he and Holly plan to commit suicide; in his second recording, he does not mention the other deaths at all, remarking only that “Holly and I have had fun” and comically correcting his grammar. This preservation, in other words, leaves out the details that might fill in the lack of causal, psychological motivation in the film. His disavowal of the murders he has committed ultimately makes Kit’s attempts at preservation a failed endeavor from the start.

At this point we need to remember that Bazin’s notion of preservation is historical – that is, for Bazin the desire for preservation in the spectator is linked to his notion of the historical development of cinema and the other arts – whereas Kit’s attempts at preserving his self through the objects he leaves behind disavows any meaningful relationship to the significant objects of the past; it is ultimately only a fiction. In writing of the human, psychological need for preservation, Bazin was speaking, of course, of various cultural activities throughout history, of which film was both the latest manifestation and the ultimate apex. Film, in Bazin’s thinking, through its ability to preserve the (moving) likeness of the recorded human being through a series of still pictures, fleshed out and animated attempts at preservation that remained in a state of still-life in the case of the Egyptian sarcophagus, the painted portrait, or the photograph. For Bazin, such attempts at preservation are not simply the act of the camera: they also required the participation of objects (or human subjects) in the pro-filmic field, towards which the camera productively intends, and a viewing subject, intending towards the
cinema screen with the desire to see objects from the historical past preserved for present view. However, Kit’s attempts to preserve the meaning of his life, such as he sees it, are located not within such dialogical relationships with the social world or the historical past. No matter how intensely the viewer of *Badlands* attempts to think through what Kit says, revelation into his motives or history is not forthcoming, for Kit disavows the meaning of those important events which he himself has caused: that is, the history of his own victims.

Shortly after the scenes of murder, and before he attempts to construct his own preservation of the self in the dictaphone recordings, we see Kit disavow his victims, physically setting them out of sight, hiding the young couple and Cato behind closed doors, or, in the case of Holly’s father, destroying their corporeal remains. In a sense, Kit is mastering the meaning of these deaths and their importance in his own history through a refusal to acknowledge them, that is, through the construction of a personal, illusory master narrative which carefully leaves these histories out. His recorded testimony is thus unmoored from any substantial, dialogic engagement with the subjects and objects of the historical world. In the absence of any such mention of his victims from his dictaphone recordings of his own personal history (whose presence, after all, he has already disavowed in the physical sense, moving them, literally, from out of his perceptual field and then fleeing the site of the murders), his attempts at preserving a narrative of his experience become testaments of his failure to substantiate an experience. Thus, even if Kit’s violence – and his sense that his own life will soon end because of the violence he
has caused – provokes his desire for preservation, it is a preservation which disavows the relationship to the larger historical world in which he is finitely embodied.

Despite his attempts, then, Kit fails to engage meaningfully with the phenomena which surround him, and his attempt at constructing a personal history is at best parodic. It is true, of course, that Malick’s characters do not regard themselves with the self-importance of characters in Hollywood historical epics. As Adrian Martin has written, “Malick’s characters are never wholly there in their story, their history, their destiny: they float like ghosts, unformed, malleable, subject to mercurial shifts in mood or attitude, no more stable or fixed than the breeze or the stream.”33 As true as Martin’s statement is relative to Malick’s subsequent films, Kit, and Holly cannot quite reach a regard for the self as being of any importance. The reason “they float like ghosts” is not because their embodied experience sends them into new lines of flight, as in the experiences of characters in the later films, but rather because this experience remains buried, like the time capsule, in an untapped potential to make meaning. Yet, as I have already hopefully implied, although it does not quite possess the lush lyricism of Malick’s subsequent work, watching his first feature is not itself an alienating experience. Malick’s filmmaking strategies, departing as they do from the standardized conventions of most narrative cinema, encourage the viewer to develop a heightened, sensitive regard for the death and the violence in the film. In Badlands this marks the difference between Kit, Holly, and us; in the later films, however, it will mark instead a site of shared experience and sensitivity, particularly as Linda in Days of Heaven, Witt in The Thin Red
Line, and John Smith in The New World more actively and passionately lead us into the worlds created through Malick’s images.

**Images of Death**

If clear relationships with objects elude the characters, there are still several moments in Badlands when we glimpse something of an object, or another subject, in ways a character does not. This is precisely at the moment of death, the moment when a human subject passes from its status as a potentially becoming subject into the category of finished object. Malick and his camera acknowledge the fragments of history his characters disavow through the presentation of the film’s own images of the violence and death left in the wake of Kit’s murderous trail, images frequently functioning in a way for the spectator of the film that is different than that of the character. The viewer is occasionally invited to respond to the images of the dead and the dying that the characters flee from – images that perform a shock to thought as in the time image – but at the same time is put into an uncertain position that makes it impossible to synthesize the fragments into a historical narrative whence they derive their meaning. I would like to conclude this chapter by exploring these very images. Unlike the objects mentioned earlier which elude a larger significance – the pieces of detritus which Kit encounters, but cannot use – objects marked by death and violence are, with few exceptions, filmed by Malick in a more direct manner, and in a way that is not tethered to either character subjectivity, psychology, or classical narrative form.
In considering the viewer’s own apprehension of these images of the dead and of the dying in Badlands, it is here productive to link further the thinking of Bazin, Cavell, and Deleuze. For Bazin, carefully organized images of death and dying are quintessentially realist images, for they paradoxically reproduce unrepeatable moments in a life. Bazin’s most celebrated meditation on death is a short article entitled “Death Every Afternoon” (La mort tous les après-midi), which takes as its ostensible subject Pierre Braunberger’s documentary The Bullfight (La Course de Taureaux, 1949). For Bazin, the death of the bull in the film is especially affecting:

We do not die twice. In this respect, a photograph does not have the power of film; it can only represent someone dying or a corpse, not the elusive passage from one state to the other . . . This is why the representation on screen of a bull being put to death (which presupposes that the man has risked death) is in principle as moving as the spectacle of the real instant that it reproduces. In a certain sense, it is even more moving because it magnifies the quality of the original moment through the contrast of its repetition. It confers on it an additional solemnity . . . On the screen, the toreador dies every afternoon.  

Bazin’s comparison here of the affect of the presence of the dying and the dead seen in the photograph (the still image of a moment in death or the already dead) and the affect of the presence of death seen in the cinema (the living animation of both, but one still enabled by the stillness of the photograms which comprise its materiality) indicates how far, in one sense, his meditation on death in cinema is from the work of Roland Barthes, whose Camera Lucida contemplates a very private photograph (so private that it is never
shown to his reader) of the author’s recently deceased mother in an equally idiosyncratic, impressionistic fashion. As Philip Rosen has shown, for Barthes photography is radically asocial; the private affects generated by the photograph are not caught up with the social rationalization of imagery as in the narrative cinema (although Barthes does acknowledge that his private response is bound up with ideology). In Bazin, it is precisely the opposite: the social, public nature of cinema enables a more affecting representation of death.

To explore this difference, it is worth noting that Bazin is not simply responding to a raw moving image of a bull being put to its death; nor is it a private response as in Barthes. His is instead a response to a series of aesthetic choices that are seen to preserve the corporeality of the public event documented in the film and then projected in the public space of the theater. These aesthetic choices and this mode of exhibition, although for Bazin seen in a documentary, are closely bound up with the history of narrative film that in most of his most celebrated essays is Bazin’s main point of focus. In The Bullfight, as Bazin notes, we see the documentation of a bullfight, and the ensuing death of a bull at the hands of a bullfighter – or, more accurately, several bulls and several bullfighters, given that Bazin notes the film’s classical editing strategies: “So perfectly do the matches on action conceal the articulation of the shots that the film would have to be viewed with a moviola to distinguish with certainty between a single shot and a sequence created by patching together five or six different shots.” Here Bazin – frequently figured in theoretical discourse as a fierce opponent of manipulative editing strategies – directly admits how completely the realism of cinema’s indexical, photographic trace is
engendered in *The Bullfight* by discrete illusionism, such that this documentary can only effectively “document” its object by rationalizing the contingent details of the pro-filmic field through a standardized mode of cinematic articulation. Although ostensibly a documentary, then, *The Bullfight* also partakes of similar editing strategies ensuring the smooth movement of figures in the most proficient Hollywood cinema.

In other words, the image of the death of the bull in *The Bullfight* is not simply “captured” in the raw on film. Instead, the pieces of celluloid containing the representation of its death are selected and organized in tandem with other pieces of celluloid both preceding and following that representation, all through the automatisms of a social institution (the mainstream cinema, which by the 1940s was thoroughly established) so as to give us an *illusion* of the real. But it is an illusion that, through its choices of poetic effects that are not *too* obvious or manipulative (after all, one of the points of Bazin’s article was to teach his readers about the film’s use of editing, which they would likely have not otherwise noticed), respects the original and *whole* event that is documented (the bullfight). The film camera’s “one-to-one” relationship with reality – here, the reality of death – is, then, not only a property of the camera, but is also generated through the filmmakers’ organization of the pieces of celluloid which result from the camera’s recording. For Bazin, *The Bullfight* evinces how affecting the instant of real death can be when its detail is stitched within carefully organized moving images that respect the original space and time of the duration of that death.

But this careful organization is not only the product of the film; the film is, in a sense, echoing, within the realm of cinema, the kind of social organization and
ritualization of death that has already taken place through the original event itself, the
bullfight. In the film, the rationalization of the most salient documented detail – the death
of the bull – allows death to be present, to be preserved, and to be affective within the
repeated and thus ritualistic projection of a historical reconstruction of a real event: a
bullfight, which unfolds from beginning to end on screen just as a real bullfight would,
and which has its own rationalized form of ritual. What we are given in this film is the
documentation of an event that, much like the institution of mainstream cinema itself, is
presented within a context of accepted and normalized historical practices. The death of
the bull is not only affecting because the camera with which *The Bullfight* is filmed has
respected its presence through the normalized methods of realistic documentary
filmmaking; the death of the bull is affecting because the bull, as object, is firmly located
within a larger social institution, the bullfight, with its own norms, which the
documentary – itself a normalized social institution – preserves and echoes through the
organizational, ritualistic, and rationalizing techniques within its own sphere.

There is, however, another aspect to this cinematic preservation of death for
Bazin, and it is one which pivots equally on the notion that, in addition to preserving
images of reality, the film camera and the serial organization of images also often *elide*
reality in, paradoxically, the most realist films. The notion of the close dialectical
relationship between effacement and preservation in Bazin’s desire for a realist cinema
has been perspicaciously noted by Karla Oeler, who writes that “For Bazin, where
everything is recorded or reproduced, nothing stands out. All stands to be lost to serial
anonymity . . . Throughout his career, Bazin praises moments when films obscure and
elide, as if in the very act of showing and preserving the camera also threatens to repress. “Although the death of the bull is, on one level, preserved – that is, it is “contained,” in some sense, within the images of the film – it is very important to note that in The Bullfight the bull’s death is part of a larger context communicated through closely knit long shots, which includes bullfighter, arena, and audience; it is precisely from this context so preserved through camera placement and editing that the death of the bull, for Bazin as for the participants in the original event, derives its affect and its meaning. “The death of the bull” is neither a subject nor an object that can participate in its photographic presence on celluloid. It is instead, by virtue of the radically interior character of the moment of death which the bull is undergoing, unrepresentable. On a certain level, then, the death of the bull is effaced, only glimpsed; it is never directly grasped as the single object of attention. For Bazin to efface this grasp is not only to make realist cinema but also to make an ethical realist cinema. In other words, Bazin knows that the rationalization of the cinematic institution has the dangerous potential to turn each unique moment of death (whether real or fictionalized) into simply another object repeated within the standardized machinations of the culture industry, as part of a larger mechanism which exists, as industry, to generate profit, and as a form, to master what is contingent in the visual. A Bazinian cinema is also aware that the interior affect of death cannot be visually represented, and thus situates the affect tethered to death in a social, discursive realm. What makes The Bullfight so affecting and so singular for Bazin is not simply that a bull dies and is attended to by the camera. It is that the organization of the images in this film are geared not towards the preservation of the single moment (the
bull’s death) but towards the preservation of the larger ritual (the bullfight) in which the particular, though intensely affecting, moment of death is allowed to retain both its contingent, unrepresentable particularity, its status as the not-yet-object and its meaning for others in the social sphere.

What would be a Bazinian response to the images of (fictional) death in *Badlands*? We can only speculate, but a comparison of the presentation of death in Malick’s film to the presentation of death in *The Bullfighter* is instructive. Unlike *The Bullfight*, in our viewing of the fictional world of *Badlands* there is no closely knit echo between the pro-filmic “spectators” of death (Kit and Holly) and our own experiences of the images of the dying and dead we see on the screen. While images of the dead and the dying in Malick’s film are presented not as part of a circuit of shot-reaction shot structures that might imbue the dead with a diegetically confirmed affect or significance, nor do long shots in the film create a fictional context in which the death of a particular being might take on a larger social meaning. These images of the dead and the dying exist over and beyond the experience of the characters, as phenomena – instances of Deleuze’s time-image – to which the viewer is called upon to respond in the absence of social meaning within the diegesis. What is missing within the film is the meaning-making socialization which the gaze of diegetic spectators might grant the dying and the dead. Malick accounts for this lack in his presentation of death to the spectator, which respectfully elides the particular experience of death, placing the transition from life to death in every instance off-screen. Although images of dying are salient – indeed, moments of dying are depicted in close-ups in a film in which close-ups are hard to come
by – we are never at any moment shown in them either human or animal slipping finally into a state of objecthood.

Consider the first death depicted in the film, the death of an animal. Holly’s father has learned she is seeing Kit without his permission. As punishment, he takes her dog out into a field and, with Holly standing in the background, shoots it. (Holly quickly flees the scene of the death after the shot is fired). Quick edits, rather than preserving the event, break it up (and surely this issues in part from a practical consideration, since Malick could not have ethically filmed the killing of an animal and closer-shots mask the fact that the real animal does not actually die here); but the final two images we see in this sequence linger even as Holly leaves the scene. In the first, lying slightly obscured behind tall leaves of grass, Holly’s dog is shown breathing its final breaths, marking the elusive transformation from life to death of which Bazin speaks. Holly has fled this scene after the firing of the gun. Malick, on the other hand, remains attentive to the dying dog as the character runs, but he cuts before death turns the dog into a finalized object. In the second, her father throws a bag which contains the body of the dog into a river, and the camera lingers (after the father leaves) as the dog flows calmly down the stream. Neither of these moments which fixate on death and its aftermath tell us of the character’s thoughts or feelings towards the deceased animal, which is eventually consigned to the category – like the dead dog Kit encounters earlier in the film – of detritus. Prior to the shooting of the animal, Holly’s voice-over narrates the sequence, informing the viewer of the reason for the dog’s death. However, her voice, beyond simply telling us what we might have been able to confirm simply by looking at the images in relation to the
previous sequences in the film, does not give us the additional information that we might desire: what, for example, does Holly now think of her father’s act, at the point in time in which she retrospectively recounts it for us? Unlike the example of *The Bullfight*, in which the death of the bull is stitched into a cinematic ritual that both guarantees a larger social meaning at the same time respects the radical particularity of death, the death of this animal in *Badlands* is hardly glimpsed as an individual instance and it is never retrospectively understood within a history. These images of the dead cannot but stand autonomously from the circuit of causality and character knowledge because the dead have been disavowed by the characters within the fictional world of the film.

What is then repressed on one level (the experience of the characters) figures saliently on another (the experience of the spectator and the attention which Malick’s own camera pays to these images of the dead and the dying). For the characters, these dying figures are associated with their own entropy, their failure to become as social subjects. But for us, these dying figures function as time images which pressure our thinking – not only through *Badlands*, but indeed through the motif of death as it circulates and shifts through Malick’s entire oeuvre. Other examples, in this present film, abound: Holly’s dead fish dies, and she throws it into a field and runs away; the camera lingers as the fish struggles to breathe but cuts away before the moment of death. Human deaths are treated in a similar fashion. After Kit shoots Cato in front of his trailer, Cato struggles back inside and sits on his bed; Kit and Holly follow him. Holly asks Kit, in a moment of almost astonishing naïveté, how Cato is doing, Kit can only respond by looking out the window (away from Cato) and responding that because he shot him in the
stomach, he doesn’t have much chance. Kit returns to the bedroom, looking one last time at Cato alive, and then, as if attempting to justify his action, tells Holly that Cato stole the birdcage in his trailer. In perhaps the most striking shot in the scene, Cato, accepting the fact of his own death, looks into a small mirror, as if to capture just one more glimpse of his subjecthood before it slips away, or to attempt to extract a personal, interior meaning from the moment of his own death in the face of a social situation (i.e., the responses of Holly and Kit) that offers no consoling meaning, and which contains only responses to his death that are absurd at worst and utterly insignificant at best.

If Cato looks into a mirror at his moment of death, it is worth remembering that the mirror is often used as a metaphor for film itself. In showing us Cato looking into the mirror, searching for some sign of the meaning of his finitely embodied, interior self at the moment of its extinction – but unable to situate that look within a larger social significance – it is almost as if Cato suddenly becomes aware of his status as a character in a fictional film, and that only he, and not the film camera, can account for the meaning of his life. Perhaps in this moment, and less saliently in all of the moments of death that figure in the film, Malick is again forcefully reminding us that cinema itself is only partially able to suggest to us human interiority. That is, just as Bazin described the cinema as only an asymptote for reality – it can only come close to touching an accurate picture of the world as it is without actually replacing or becoming that world – cinema can only approach human interiority from the outside, and thus can come close, but never finally grasp, the whole person. Socialized, ritualized acts of meaning-making, like those within Bazin’s viewing of *The Bullfighter*, can endow the individual with social
significance but it is never a significance that exceeds or fully determines the meaning of the individual. *Badlands*, through the failure of its characters to weave dying and dead individuals into a meaningful social fabric, only throws this idea into greater relief. The terrible fact that *Badlands* acknowledges is that, in a society that does not provide the ground for acts of dialogical meaning-making, humans become more fully understandable as victims and objects rather than as subjects. Oeler, once again dialoguing with Bazin in relation to her own interest in the phenomenon of murder and interiority as depicted in the cinema, has articulated the idea in the following way:

Murder is an allegory of representation: if murder hinges on the stark negation of an individual, cinema – which must represent the victim with discursive techniques that can never fully comprehend a human being – courts complicity with the murders it depicts. But at the same time, murder can paradoxically endow the victim with a referential fullness: the transformation of a person into a victim dramatically suggests the subjective plenitude, and particularity, which has been lost. Murder scenes are thus poised between reducing and registering the person implied by the storied victim.\(^{39}\)

The nearly complete alienation and disaffection present within the social world depicted in *Badlands* – the severity of which is unusual within Malick’s oeuvre – is one in which subjective plenitude only becomes salient when it is lost. But disturbingly, it is precisely a plenitude that the characters themselves cannot recognize as having been lost. In his historical account, Kit is unable to preserve the meaning of the dead, Holly is still too young to do it justice, and neither one of them are able to establish a dwelling which
might allow them to become something other than what society has deemed acceptable. In the absence of the diegetic gaze that might bestow upon the victim a place in history, Malick calls upon us, with his first feature film, to become these seers in Deleuze’s conception of a “cinema of the seer” by responding to images of death that slowly disambiguate themselves from a fictional world unable to consecrate them with historical meaning, and sometimes even unable, yet more terribly, to honor them with a loving glance.


5 Dana Polan makes a similar point in “Auteurism and War-teurism: Terrence Malick’s War Movie,” in *The Last Great American Picture Show*, 275.


13 William Johnson, “Badlands (Film Review),” in Film Quarterly 27, no. 3 (Spring 1974), 44.
15 Michel Ciment, interview with Terrence Malick, in Lloyd Michaels, Terrence Malick (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 112.
21 Lloyd Michaels, Terrence Malick (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 27.
22 Lloyd Michaels, Terrence Malick, 34.
23 Michaels also explores this idea in his study. See also Michaels, Terrence Malick, 26.
25 Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 2: The Time-Image, 2.
28 Michaels, Terrence Malick, 29.
29 Michaels, Terrence Malick, 28.
30 Christian Keathley defines the Bazinian moment of revelation in the following way: “The automatically produced image becomes a means of revelation about the world, and the cinema is an instrument facilitating such encounters, for it allows us to locate what it transfers.” See Christian Keathley, Cinephilia and History, or the Wind in the Trees (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 58.


38 Karla Oeler, “André Bazin and the Preservation of Loss,” in Film International 5, no. 6 (2007), 77.

39 Karla Oeler, “André Bazin and the Preservation of Loss.”
CHAPTER FIVE: ON DAYS OF HEAVEN

Expressing a World

One of this study’s central assertions is that Terrence Malick’s cinema refuses to reduce the power of the image to a mere vehicle for narrative information. This refusal to burden the image with already articulated meaning, in turn, becomes for viewers a challenge to create expressive significance through an experience of Malick’s fictional worlds. The power of Malick’s images, and their effects on spectators, has as its parallel the open-ended perceptual experience of the characters, who are ultimately led to question these worlds which we see on the screen. In Badlands, Malick’s characters more often than not avoid such a confrontation with the world around them, and as a result shape an understanding of their past experiences (where they shape any understanding at all) that strikes the viewer as less than tenable. In the later films, however, the characters’ attempts to inscribe meaning onto the phenomena sensitively perceived in fleeting experience become the central thematic of the films and a key component informing their form. Beginning with Days of Heaven, Malick’s cinema creates not only a fictional world for spectators, but also polyvalent expressions of that world through a depiction of the embodied experience of particular characters. (We might then say that Malick creates not only a world, but many worlds, a notion that, as we will see, becomes pertinent to understanding how our experience of the films after Badlands intersects with the experiences of his characters). His films beginning with Days of Heaven frequently feature characters inscribed in no less socially rigid positions than Kit and Holly, but they
are nevertheless shown to more actively shape their own expressive significance. The voice-over, one of Malick’s key stylistic techniques, is one sign of this active shaping.

Characters in *Days of Heaven*, Malick’s second film, engage more openly than Holly and Kit with the haptic and sensuous detail which Malick’s own camera, for its part, displays to its audience. Only one of these characters, Linda (Linda Manz) is given the privilege of voice-over by Malick. Linda is more curious about the world around her than Holly, an especially salient trait given the harshness of her existence as an itinerant laborer. Linda will be the first of Malick’s voice-over narrators to fully respond to the environment in the sensitive, imaginative, and at times nearly pre-linguistic way that the film itself encourages in its spectator. Understood in this register, the voice-overs from *Days of Heaven* onward might be described as impressionistic attempts to craft a narration, or an expression, in relation to certain phenomena, for none of Malick’s voice-over narrators can be seen to ascribe a closed or exclusive meaning onto what the viewer sees. Adrian Martin, for example, has suggested that Malick’s films, like the work of the experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage but in a narrative context, “film the things of the world (people, animals, flora and fauna) before they acquire their names, indeed before they coalesce into firm shapes, objects, identities…”1 Malick’s narrators after *Days of Heaven*, too, seek to describe the things of the world in a similar manner, investing what they see with original significance that does not close down and finish meaning but rather, for the spectator, opens it up. Linda’s narration in *Days of Heaven* does not posses an omniscient understanding which might grant to the viewer secrets revealing either story information or character psychology; in many respect, Malick’s second film has a
narrative every bit as elliptical as his first. Instead, it is the attempt by Linda to fill in the gaps – to register what she sees and remembers of her experience through a highly original, memorable, and sometimes fallible expressivity – that is shared with us, an attempt that invites us, too, to invest our experience of Malick’s film with an expressive significance of our own.

Martin’s suggestion that Malick refuses to name the things he films does not mean, then, that Malick refuses the power of language, for that would result in filmmaking as dumb to the richness of experience as Kit and Holly frequently appear to be in *Badlands*. It only means that the films pose the relationship between significance and the world as an open question, a question that Linda in particular begins to answer with a creativity and openness to the undetermined aspects of the future that parallels her director’s. As Martin goes on to point out, “For the moments we observe them, [Malick’s characters] do not behave like historic figures who know they are forging either a personal or social destiny.” In other words, despite their status as historical films, historical significance is still in a state of becoming within Malick’s fictional worlds, open to ongoing development and contestation, to the point that it can suggest the possible existence of another world. In *Days of Heaven*, the fictional figures in his films begin to meet this challenge of envisioning a world.

Set mostly in the Texas Panhandle, *Days of Heaven* tells the story of two lovers, Bill (Richard Gere) and Abby (Brooke Adams), who abandon a Chicago steel mill in favor of a no less harsh existence as laborers in the Panhandle. They pose as brother and sister while working land owned by a character known only as the Farmer (Sam
Shepherd). The Farmer suffers from a disease (the exact nature of which we do not know) and has, we will eventually learn, less than a year to live. Bill’s 12-year-old sister, Linda, journeys with Bill and Abby from the industrial factories of Chicago to Texas, an open Western frontier slowly being claimed by industrialized labor. The reasons for Bill and Abby posing as siblings on the farm are not given, yet it results in an opportunity for the two of them to improve the material conditions of their own existence. Learning of the Farmer’s illness, Bill encourages Abby (in a plot device that echoes the Henry James novel *The Wings of the Dove*, only with genders reversed) to marry the Farmer, a decision enabling the couple to reap the financial rewards of the Farmer’s land but which both later come to regret. After a fire destroys the Farmer’s land at the end of the film, Bill kills the Farmer in an act of self-defense after the latter discover the former’s ruse. Bill, in turn, is shot down by the authorities, in an ending that faintly echoes the capture of Kit at the end of *Badlands*, while both Linda and Abby look on. From a point of view at a moment in the near future, Linda – who does not directly participate in many of the film’s key narrative events – narrates the story for us, and in some cases infers character motivation and psychology in ways that are not otherwise apparent within the visual and sonic information the film presents.

Despite this narrative’s insistence on Bill, Abby, and Linda as subjected laborers, they are able to enjoy moments of leisure too, and many of these involve an engagement with the beautiful environment surrounding them. While the encroachment of industrialization is acutely felt in the film, Malick’s characters in *Days of Heaven* achieve a closer, more tactile relationship with nature than their counterparts in the director’s
previous film. This is not only the result of a change in performance style and screenplay; in part this relationship between figure and environment reflects certain shifts in Malick’s own film practice. Nestor Almendros, the cinematographer of *Days of Heaven*, once noted that production practices on the film shocked the unionized film technicians on the set. As Almendros is one of Malick’s key contributors, it is worth quoting him at length on this subject:

*Days of Heaven* was not a rigidly prepared film. Many interesting ideas developed as we went along. This left room for improvisation and allowed us to take advantage of circumstances. The call sheets, for example, which are Xerox copies specifying the next day’s work, were usually not very detailed. The schedule was changed to suit the weather and also our frame of mind. This disoriented some of the Hollywood crew, who were not used to working in such an improvised way and complained . . . With few exceptions, the crew (which I did not choose) was made up of old-guard, typically Hollywood professionals. They were accustomed to a glossy style of photography . . . They felt frustrated because I gave them so little work. The normal practice in Hollywood is for the gaffer and grip to prepare the lighting beforehand, so I found arc lights set up for every scene. Day after day I would have to ask them to turn off everything they had prepared for me. I realized that this annoyed them; some of them began saying openly that we didn’t know what we were doing, that we weren’t ‘professional.’

Almendros here documents the confrontation between a more leisurely style of filmmaking, open to the thoughts available through the fleeting impressions of the
moment – in which the feeling of being open to contemplation of circumstances we often find in the viewing experience of Malick’s filmmaking generally speaking becomes a constituent aspect of their production – and the Hollywood system of instrumental labor which runs to maximum efficiency. Malick’s own approach to production also tended to challenge this system on levels that extended beyond cinematography. His production designer, John Fisk, was called upon to build an actual mansion in Calgary, Alberta (which substituted for the Texas Panhandle in the film) rather than only a façade as in conventional productions, and many of Malick’s salient cinematographic techniques in *Days of Heaven* harness a freedom in exploring and perceiving space. One example of such an approach is his use of the Panaglide, an early prototype of the Steadicam which in the late 1970s was still a novel technique. This exploratory style of filmmaking is distinct relative to the restrictions Malick felt in making *Badlands*, which often resulted in the director having to rush through the filming of shots and sticking very close to the design of the screenplay, rather than taking his time to inflect that screenplay through the contingent impressions which the director might have been able to register on a less rushed film set. The filming of *Days of Heaven* shed many of these shackles, resulting in dynamic, liminal, impressionistic imagery and sounds that are met in turn by characters anxious and willing to receive them.

*Days of Heaven* presents these impressions through an editing strategy which often insists on the extent to which images in sequence are relatively autonomous. Michel Chion has suggested that Malick’s work functions as a kind of parataxis, in which “there is this, and at the same time – or then, there is that, and it’s up to the viewer who feels so
inclined to create a relationship between them.” Although Malick is telling a story, and a certain causal logic governs some transitions across sequences, the more salient effects in *Days of Heaven* are the paratactic transitions which often occur to and from images, which, if not disrupting narrative causality and connection outright, prompt us to question relationships between images in ways that go beyond the progression of a story. For example, after Bill, Abby, Linda, and other itinerant laborers arrive on the Farmer’s land for the first time, a long shot establishes a clear demarcation of space wherein the Farmer’s mansion is strictly separated from the grounds on which the laborers will live and work. The Farmer’s foreman (Robert Wilke) implicitly expresses this interpretation of the space as hierarchal when he orders the workers not to approach the mansion. Yet this image, which would clearly seem to inform us of the oppression to which the workers are subjected, is immediately followed by images insisting not on work but on moments of leisure: a shot of Bill admiring the landscape is immediately followed by incongruous shots of buffalo grazing the land, and then by Linda and her friend (Jackie Shultis) running their hands through wheat fields. Malick here contests any understanding of his film as only a linear narrative structure which will tell of the oppressed experience of itinerant laborers; if the film at times insists upon this oppression, it also pressures us to consider the social situation of the workers in relation to their moments of leisure, “the days of heaven” of the film’s title. Far from creating a piece of ideological or didactic social realism, then, Malick’s own attitude towards these phenomena is that of a film poet. Further, his editing practice results in a space open for the further inscription of
meaning; the film’s images proceed in ways which encourage the associations which accrue as viewers and characters ascribe significance to what they perceive.

One of the consequences of this approach is that the site of our viewing and the sites of characters’ experiences begin to find a shared space in *Days of Heaven*, even as viewers remain separate from the characters’ fictional world and from their intentional projects and desires. The open-ended nature of perceptual experience is informed on the viewer’s side by the spaces generated by Malick’s parataxis, and on the side of the characters in the liminal space existing between the harsh labor they at times experience and the fleeting moments of leisure they otherwise enjoy (and the latter frequently suggests to them that another kind of existence might be attainable apart from their life as workers). In speaking of *Badlands*, Malick remarked at the time of the film’s release that his characters “only know how to react to what’s inside them. They do not communicate with the outside world, they don’t understand what other people feel.”

*Days of Heaven*, in this respect, is different relative to *Badlands*, because Malick’s strategies of parataxis in his second film intersects with the sensitivity of his characters, particularly his young narrator who is more adept, in her way, at attempting to understand what she sees than Holly. There is one sequence in *Badlands*, however, in which the film’s young narrator does begin to account for the specter of death which haunts the film, and by extension her own and others’ existence within history, and this is the sequence in which Holly, absconding with Kit in the woods, views several images through her father’s stereopticon. It is this sequence that bridges the voice of the young narrator of *Badlands* to Linda, the (even younger) female narrator of *Days of Heaven*. A comparison of the two
begins to tell us how Malick’s narrators intersect with his own cinematic practice. In turn, this relationship between the narrators and Malick’s cinematic form will further suggest that his work as a whole conceives, in a concrete way through the content of the films themselves, the cinema as a site for dialogical, even democratic, expressions of meaning.

**Moving Images**

Despite Linda’s greater sensitivity to the world around her, she does share some traits with Malick’s earlier narrator. Both are young girls who lives are in great part directed by male characters. What Holly and Linda do control – or at least are shown to have the potential to control – is available only through their retrospective, first-person narration, that is, their reflective understanding of their own pasts, which on an experiential level they do not often have the freedom to direct. Marginalized characters and voices – often female – are, of course, too familiar throughout the history of the classical cinema, which, as Laura Mulvey famously suggested in 1975, tends to position the woman as a passive object to be gazed upon rather than an active agent. A sub-lineage of American cinema, in which we can place Malick’s first two films, has resisted this marginalization, and for Malick this resistance informs, and to some extent disrupts, the aesthetic shape and narrative structure of the films. As Anne Latto has suggested, Malick’s two early films are a substantial revision of the tradition within classical Hollywood for bestowing upon male protagonists narrative agency and power, for although the male characters in both *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* “remain active,” she notes “they are viewed obliquely, via characters whose voices would be traditionally marginalised or suppressed.”

10
words, Malick’s primary interest lies not in the goals or desires of his male protagonists; his sympathies remain with his young female narrators in his first two films, particularly Linda, who encounters more directly phenomena in the world which pressure them to articulate what it means for them to be in the world. (In the Deleuzian terms present earlier in this study, we might say that if the male figures are agents of the movement-image, the female narrators in these first two films, Linda especially, confront more directly the time-image). As narrators, then, Holly in *Badlands* and Linda in *Days of Heaven* depart from the conventional first-person voice-over narration in cinema. Through this concept of a marginalized voice given the power to shape the meaning of history and experience, both Holly and, to a much greater extent, Linda, begin to find a new source of potential agency and power.

To that end, the voices of Holly and Linda in Malick’s first two films remind us that automatisms (such as the automatism of the voice-over and the philosophical concepts produced in relation to it) are available not only to ensure a continuity of tradition, but also so that subjects may *intervene* in tradition, that is, to redirect and possibly change it. These voice-overs, then, place on the theoretical table once again the potential of cinema as a dialogical art form within modernity, perhaps less on the side of production (neither Holly or Linda produce or author the images we see on the screen, exactly, even if they are felt to have some share in inscribing meaning in relation to them) and more on the side of reception. Holly and Linda are elements of the narrative structures of two films, and thus are in a sense structured, and likewise, within the narratives themselves, their lives are directed by other characters. But the open-ended
nature of their voice-overs suggests that these two characters also significantly intervene in the structuring of the films from their marginal social positions, making important steps towards the making of their own historical meaning. They are, of course, not the only agents in the films who express significance; in *Days of Heaven*, as we will see, both Bill and the Farmer impose different kinds of discourse onto the story we see, but given that both of these characters are dead by the end of the film, it is Linda’s retrospective narration which remains with us.

Linda’s voice, and Holly’s in the stereopticon sequence, thus significantly coincide with our own experiences of the films, an idea which echoes Garrett Stewart’s suggestion, explored in the third chapter, that film style is not always simply an adjunct to narrative structure, but that style (in this case, the stylistic technique of the voice-over) can function in contrapuntal ways relative to the ongoing development of narrative form. What *Badlands* in the stereopticon scene, and *Days of Heaven* as a whole, pose to us is the idea of cinema within modernity as a potential site through which marginalized voices may begin to make meaning. *Days of Heaven*, in particular, asks us to reconcile this idea in relation to the young character’s experience of modernity against the traditional agrarian landscape of the Texas Panhandle; in turn, this will encourage us to reflect upon larger ideas linking cinema to modernity.

Before deepening this argument through a careful reading of these female voices in Malick’s first two films, it is important to point out the more general theoretical implications of Malick’s creative use of the voice, and specifically the use of first-person voice-over narration. Sarah Kozloff points out that the technique of the first-person
narrator serves a variety of functions across different kinds of films, but most have a general tendency of “naturalizing” the source of the narrative, by increasing identification with the characters, by prompting nostalgia, and by stressing the individuality and subjectivity of perception and storytelling.” This observation squares with the theoretical consideration of the “voice” within cinema studies more generally, for as Mary Ann Doane observes, “The fantasmatic visual space which the film constructs is supplemented by techniques designed to spatialize the voice, to localize it, give it depth, and thus lend to the characters the consistency of the real.” If this tendency within film theory to imbue the filmic voice, and by extension the first-person voice-over narrator, with the stable qualities of a present-tense “thereness” is also an accurate assessment regarding the actual use of the voice within the history of the classical cinema, as I believe it is, Malick’s use of the voices within these two films constitutes a significant creative contribution. It is a use of the voice, distinctly different from most narrative films, that calls upon us to take stock of the ways in which the first-person narrating voice-over – when it is cleaved from any sense of omniscient “authority” regarding the images against which it is heard – may potentially engage us in an intersubjective, dialogical, and historicized experience of film, and the aesthetic more generally speaking.

As the first chapter has shown, Malick’s first film – rather than using stylistic techniques to grant the viewer full access into character subjectivity, perception, and a naturalized historical past, all traits of the conventional first-person narrator – instead complicates the viewer’s identification with character insofar as characters are
themselves unsure of their subjective moorings in the world. The voice-over, rather than confirming an omniscient mastery, situates the historical past as knowledge that is still in the process of forming. In this sense, the voices of Malick’s first-person narrators tend more towards Michel Chion’s notion of the semi-acousmêtre, or the not-yet-seen voice which is unmoored in a unified subjectivity. This concept, as we will see, itself marks a departure from the consideration of more conventional uses of the voice within Chion’s theory. Chion’s work, like Doane’s, emphasizes the hierarchal nature of the presentation of the voice in most narrative sound films, suggesting that in narrative cinema “there are not all the sounds including the human voice. There are voices, and then everything else. In other words, in every audio mix, the presence of a human voice instantly sets up a hierarchy of perception . . . Let us paraphrase this to say that the presence of a human voice structures the sonic space that contains it [italics Chion’s].” In most films, the voice is situated in the body of the character, and emerges from conventional dialogue scenes; it helps to ensure that we take what we see on the screen as the transparently presented real, as phenomena that the film as image-producing apparatus has already mastered. The voice-over, on the other hand, has the potential to unmoor itself from the body from which the voice emanates, and this potential allows the voice, in some films, to express either its own omniscient, hermeneutical mastery of the world we see on screen, and in other films, to potentially undermine this sense of mastery.

Chion has termed the omniscient voice the acousmêtre, the “not-yet-seen” voice, the voice which functions, quite often, extra-diegetically. For Chion, the purest sort of acousmêtre is the voice that never appears in the diegetic world or the film frame;
bodiless, unmoored in the contingent realm of reality, this kind of voice—present in films Chion uses as examples, such as *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse, The Fog,* and *The Saga of Anatahan*—masters the visual world that it is heard to author, possessing “the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power . . . ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence . . . *The acousmêtre is everywhere,* its voice comes from an immaterial and non-localized body, and it seems that no obstacle can stop it.”¹⁵ The *acousmêtre* figures the voice as complicit with the classical cinema’s attempts at visual mastery, and complements this mastery with linguistic knowledge moored in a subject whose stability we are never called upon to question. Malick’s narrators, however, do not possess the full power of the *acousmêtre*; they fall in the second category mentioned above, the voice which cannot fully master what is seen. In *Badlands,* from the very first frames of the film depicting the character in her bedroom playing with her dog, Holly’s voice-over is associated with a body that we can see and, furthermore, a body which has already been disciplined by the space of the family home within the fictional world. There is, however, a temporal disjunction between what we see of Holly and what we hear, given that she narrates the events seen in the film from some unknown point in the near future. It is better to speak of her voice, then, as a “semi-*acousmêtre,*” Chion’s attendant phrase for a voice which retains at least some of its elusive aspects.¹⁶ These elusive aspects are indeed the result of the voice-over in Malick’s film emerging from a character currently undergoing her own experience of becoming in and against the world in which she has been raised. While the status of Holly’s voice as a semi-*acousmêtre* thus means that the audience will never know her fully, this also means
that Holly herself is not yet finalized as a subjective self (for omniscience is only logically possible if the self considers itself finalized, that is, if it has nothing left to learn from the experience of others); this is the source (perhaps the only source in an otherwise pessimistic film) of the film’s optimism, that Holly (and later Linda) may yet still have the opportunity to become other than what she has hitherto been given the chance to be.

Part of what mitigates against this optimism in *Badlands* is, of course, Holly’s inability to inscribe meaning onto many of the events we see in the film, particularly the deaths she encounters; as the previous chapter has discussed, she tends to disavow these events more than acknowledge them. It has been suggested that her inability to reckon with these events is in part echoed in the pop-cultural clichés dotting her narration, and to some extent this is true. But the sequence in which Holly stares into her father’s stereopticon, while hiding away in the woods after she and Kit burn down her father’s home, is the one privileged moment in the film where we see her confronting the past. That she confronts this past through a device that recalls the prehistory of the cinema itself gestures towards the idea of the moving image as a site for open-ended expression that will more deeply engage *Days of Heaven*. The images Holly looks at are vistas of various historical spaces and times, some of them easier to date than others, including the Sphinx, a steamboat in a lake, a mother with child, several Victorian women, and a large family gathering in front of a house. What these objects themselves denote, however, is less important than the significance Holly herself ascribes to them from the point of view of her own contingent situation, and in this Holly’s grasping of the images in the stereopticon is not unlike the images present to us in a Malick film. (Significantly, given
that \textit{Badlands}, in Adrian Martin’s words, “is the most pre-planned, static and composed of his films” – a description which evokes the characters’ own static nature in their refusal to confront history – Holly’s more dynamic confrontation with these open-ended moving images may in fact more substantially prefigure our relationship to Malick’s subsequent films rather than allegorize our relationship to the greater part of \textit{Badlands} itself.\textsuperscript{17} As she looks at the images, we hear Holly say (looking back at this moment retrospectively) the following words: “It hit me that I was just this little girl, born in Texas, whose father was a sign painter, who had only just so many years to live. It sent a chill down my spine and I thought, where would I be this very moment if Kit had never met me? Or killed anybody? This very moment.” Holly reaches a level of self-consciousness at “this very moment” that is hardly even glimpsed elsewhere in her narration or in the experiences of any of the other characters. As Barbara Brickman has suggested, “In this one small interlude, we see the female teen simultaneously as spectator \textit{and} as storyteller.”\textsuperscript{18} Here Holly not only receives these images of the past, she animates them and inscribes upon them a significance directly pertaining to her own finite, contingent existence.

The photographs Holly animates through the stereopticon thus remind us of the status of film itself as a medium operating through the mechanized movement of twenty-four photograms per second. Holly’s gaze into the stereopticon, and her physical bond with the machinations of the stereopticon itself, when taken as a larger parallel to the cinema itself, prompts us to become aware of the materiality and tactility which underpins filmic discourse, a discourse that, in this scene at least, Holly controls and uses
as a tool to understand her own past. For Garrett Stewart, the extent to which Holly becomes a *public* storyteller at this moment in the film – that is, the extent to which Holly’s own experience of the stereopticon dovetails with our experience of Malick’s film in a productive manner – is open to debate:

For in that stereopticon scene, Malick’s *Badlands* takes under tacit consideration its own process as cinema, its own procession of images – in wry view of their evolved sociocultural effect. By means of the monocular film apparatus that projects Holly’s full-screen slides, of course, each vista has been derealized, its tricked foreshortenings flattened back to ordinary photographic traces. The visual and psychic effect that the imprinted panoramas have on Holly is thus kept private, not accessible to the film camera, regardless of her voice-over’s pallid attempt at an explanation.¹⁹

Departing from Stewart, I would suggest that Holly’s voice-over here, far from simply another instance of her failure at making meaning, offers her, as a narrator looking back upon the completed events of her past, the first salient opportunity – and perhaps the only such opportunity in the film – to assume a degree of narrative agency that might extricate her from the social world in which she has been inscribed. Stewart’s observation is useful in another respect, however. Although Holly’s look into the stereopticon remains an intensely private experience, it curiously registers for us on a very public level. Although she is discussing – and, perhaps for the first time, discovering – the most private of her experiences (the death of her mother, and her own mortality), she is sharing a narrative with us through the fundamental discursive means of the cinema itself (metonymically
represented here through a proto-cinematic object, the spinning images in the stereopticon), and in particular, the discursive means of the film we are presently watching. For one brief moment, Holly’s discourse and the film’s discourse merge – inhabit a shared space – and thus Holly’s future self is in a position to begin to actively make historical meaning out of the events of the past (her own past and the past images in the stereopticon, which for this fleeting moment become the past images of the film Badlands). Unlike Kit, Holly in this sequence, no matter how briefly, begins to come to terms with her finite existence within the world, an awareness that provides the enabling ground for a socially productive confrontation with the finite existence of others; she seems to glimpse the possibility of confronting the historical past and stakes out a position from which she can begin to craft historical meaning.

It is thus striking that the one moment in the film in which Holly becomes the narrative agent of her own story (a story that Kit, through the trajectory of the film’s journey, otherwise directs) is an engagement with reality through an apparatus that forms a crucial part of the cinema’s own prehistory. In using a cinema-like apparatus as a site in which to begin to make her own historical meaning, Holly’s brief experience with the stereopticon suggests that film can function as a medium open to the expressions of members of the mass public to which much of the commercial cinema is directed. In so doing, it is also reminiscent of Stanley Cavell’s assertion that in watching films we are given the opportunity to overcome skepticism – that is, in the face of “the possibility that the world we see is not the world as it is, that the world is not humanly knowable, or sharable,” we are nevertheless given the chance, when we watch films, to establish a
world which might be more fundamentally dialogic. Before expanding upon Cavell’s idea, it is easy enough to note that here Holly’s viewing through the stereopticon would automatically seem to prove Cavell right: in viewing images of the world through this old, proto-cinematic object (an object made new again in Holly’s experience), Holly does not remain isolated in her private desires, but makes a crucial first step in linking interior meaning to the outer, public world. Although elsewhere in the film Holly’s fascination with cultural artifacts, such as romance novels and fan magazines, would seem to occlude her possibility of reaching a state of historical consciousness, we should in the stereopticon scene not be suspicious of Holly’s fantasy; we should ourselves attempt to stake out what kind of knowledge it might provide her on a journey towards selfhood. As an engagement with fantasy, then, it is again remarkable that in this sequence Holly’s view intersects with our own viewing of the film’s discursive track, for her preoccupation with the moving image in this sequence, unlike so many of her other preoccupations in the film which are kept distant from us, becomes our preoccupation as well. The viewing of these images is also precisely what might make Holly a becoming subject.

If the stereopticon affords Holly the opportunity to use the images it presents to stake out an understanding of her own past, in spinning the images through the stereopticon, Holly is also, in a sense, projecting, and at the same time viewing, her own private film, and we do the same with Malick’s film. For Cavell, in watching films the modern spectator at once becomes aware of the modern epistemological fall into a state of skepticism – that is, a state in which one feels that one’s subjective perspective of the world is isolated, and not reconcilable with the world at large – and is, at the same
instant, given the opportunity to overcome it. Cavell situates skepticism within the history of the arts and the spectator’s experience of the arts:

It could be said further that what painting wanted, in wanting connection with reality, was a sense of presentness – not exactly a conviction of the world’s presence to us, but of our presence to it. At some point the unhinging of our consciousness from the world interposed our subjectivity between us and our presentness to the world. Then our subjectivity became what is present to us, individuality became isolation.\(^{21}\)

For Cavell, cinema, in contrast to painting, is not an art of representational realism, nor an art of “presentness,” strictly speaking. What we see on the screen may be “real,” and certainly present before us in a sense, but not objectively so, for its impact is felt insofar as it is, in our viewing of films, “our subjectivity…that appears present to us,” as William Rothman and Marian Keane have written in their exploration of Cavell’s philosophy.\(^{22}\)

Watching films, however, is an opportunity for the modern subject to overcome – precisely by making productive use of – this private isolation; for Cavell, as for Rothman and Keane, “our wish to escape subjectivity cannot be separated from our wish to achieve selfhood….Cavell’s idea is that selfhood cannot be achieved apart from the acknowledgement of others.”\(^{23}\) In the viewing of films we can, for Cavell, achieve selfhood, a selfhood that is not simply a private individuality or subjectivity but a position in the world – a kind of dwelling – from which to begin to acknowledge others, and thus begin to dialogue with them.
How does this happen? Cavell stresses the extent to which art, as a concept, is
dependent on the notion of *acknowledgement*, which for the philosopher is the means by
which we achieve selfhood (and selfhood is distinct, conceptually, from subjectivity; if
subjectivity is a word Cavell uses to indicate the subject in isolation, selfhood is that
isolated subject slowly taking steps towards a dialogue with others). What cinema allows
us to acknowledge is that our most private desires are, at root, extendable to something
we can call “reality,” and it is this observation which allows us to overcome our
debilitating private subjectivity and attain something like a public selfhood. As Rothman
and Keane put it in their reading of Cavell:

> When objects and persons in the world are projected and screened, they are
displaced from their natural sequences and locales. This displacement, which
enables movies to depict the fantastic as readily as the natural . . . itself
acknowledges their physical reality. Only what exists in the world can be
photographed, subjected to photography’s way of displacing things and people.
And what exists in the world already bears the stamp of our fantasies.²⁴

In Cavell’s philosophical work on film, the film medium does not simply capture reality.
Rather, it projects, exhibits, distributes – all words synonymous in this context for
*displaces* – reality. This idea allows Cavell to counter the charge that the cinema’s
frequently fantastic and artificial imagery is not “realistic.” For Cavell “realism” is not
defined by the raw capturing of reality as it is lived. For example, the pro-filmic re-
creation of the Texas Panhandle of 1917 in the Calgary, Alberta, Canada of the mid-
1970s – precisely what Malick accomplished in his second film, *Days of Heaven* – is
itself a displacement which is ideally suited to the tendency of cinema to displace reality automatically. (He performs a similar feat in *Badlands*, using locales in Colorado to substitute for scenes set in South Dakota). Holly’s projection of the stereopticon images of the past, and subsequent use of them as a site in which to begin to make sense of her own historical existence, is a similar displacement. We are here again reminded that in watching films, we are not viewing a reality that we can objectively master; we are rather viewing a displaced reality that puts us face-to-face with the fact of our own subjectivity – in other words, given that we are absent from the filmed world projected on the screen, what we are viewing puts us into a self-conscious state of awareness regarding our isolation and absence from the (filmed) world (a state that, in turn, makes us aware that our isolation cleaves us from the world as a whole; in watching films we can self-consciously enact and reflect upon the skeptic’s being in the world). The most crucial idea for Cavell is this: In realizing that film’s realism itself partakes of fantasy and recreation, that its notion of an objectively realistic world is in fact the fiction of fantasy, we encounter the idea that our own private desires and fantasies have the potential to do something more than isolate us; like the film’s recreation of pieces of filmed reality into a publicly available fiction, our private, subjective fantasies have the chance to resonate within the public, historical world, or with “reality.”

Cavell’s notion of the modern spectator as an isolated spectator, seeking through the cinema a means of dialogism, is both revisited and more deeply historicized in *Days of Heaven*, a film which, set against the dawning of industrialized modernization in the Texas Panhandle of 1916 and 1917, more directly tackles the subject of experience within
modernity. The opening credit sequence, for its part, self-reflexively reminds us of the discursive track of the filmstrip in a way that evokes the earlier stereopticon sequence in Badlands, thus establishing within the texture of the film itself that Days of Heaven will be about both film’s intervention into history, and Linda’s own (and her overcoming of isolation through this attempt to extend personal meaning into the world). Malick presents to us, as the credits unfold, a series of twenty-four sepia-toned photographs (reminding us of the twenty-four frames-per-second of the filmstrip which enable these, and all other, images in the film). These photographs also evoke the time period of the 1910s in America, and the contrasting images of communality, labor, isolation, and leisure prefigure the drama to come. Pertinent is Malick’s approach to filming these photographs. This sequence does not simply present to us a series of still photographs on-screen. Instead, Malick’s camera slowly pans vertically and horizontally the lengths of the photographs (or, in some cases, tracking in closer to them), reminding us that these twenty-four photographs, at least when animated through the machinery of cinema, are like the filmstrip which passes through the projector. Not eternal, fixed images of reality, these photos are rather themselves constructed objects open in turn to our own expressive significance. As Carole Zucker has observed, “The director endows the photographs with a temporality and compositional resonance of his own manufacture. The twenty-four photographs become ‘moving pictures’ specifically marked by the mediation of the director.”25 This credits sequence thus implies that Malick’s own poetics will intervene in the presentation and understanding of this historical past. The notion of a history that has yet to be made is, of course, also reflected in Linda’s narration, and what is most
intriguing in this respect is Linda’s own presence in a photograph at the end of the credit sequence. The photograph is of the character sitting on a sidewalk, staring directly into the lens of the photographer’s camera in a strong and assertive way that itself contests the passivity of the female in classical cinema. Striking also about this image is that it has been crafted so as to match, materially and compositionally, the previous photographs in the sequence, making it a seamless part of the history Malick is about to fictionalize. What the presence of this photograph in turn implies is that Linda’s stake in the making of meaning is as strong as Malick’s and our own.

*Days of Heaven* implies this again in a sequence later in the film in which Linda views Charlie Chaplin’s *The Immigrant*. While Holly’s viewing of the stereopticon is of an old, pre-cinematic technology, Linda confronts the moving image for what may very well be the first time. Linda does not watch Chaplin’s film in the picture palaces that were built across American during the 1910s; rather, the film is exhibited in the older manner of early cinema exhibition practices, that is, in the context of other sights which in this case include a bellydancer and a theatrical performance. This reminds us that even though Chaplin’s film was very much a part of the standardization of narrative technique in the 1910s which would cement what we now historically know as the “classical Hollywood cinema,” *The Immigrant*, and its exhibition context within Linda’s experience in Malick’s film, also at the same time partakes of certain aspects of “the cinema of attractions” – Tom Gunning’s phrase for pre-narrative silent cinema, in which particular shots and sequences, not cleanly stitched into the narrative regime of the later cinematic institution, operated autonomously and in an exhibitionistic manner, addressing the
spectator directly in the public context of his or her act of viewing rather than only as a private individual. What the presence of *The Immigrant* and Linda’s viewing situation in Malick’s film reminds us is that even after cinema became a predominantly narrative-driven institution the individual image in certain cases still had the power to operate relatively autonomously. As Tom Gunning writes, in a way which echoes Deleuze’s insistence on the emergence of the time-image from the movement-image, “the development of systematic narration and continuous action could also deliver a sensation of shock, of percussive action that is broken and picked up again continually,” an affect that is always potentially incipient within even standardized forms of classical cinema of which *The Immigrant* is also an example.

Within the exhibition context depicted in *Days of Heaven*, then, the tactile, immediate quality of particular images in the Chaplin film is emphasized over classical narrative cinema’s regulation of shocks. Chaplin’s comedy does, then, still tells a story, one of an immigrant facing poverty and subjected to a social hierarchy of power, a narrative which squares with certain aspects of Linda’s own experience as an itinerant worker. But what most concerns me here is not so much how of Chaplin’s story potentially resonates with Linda, but rather with three images, or attractions, which pass before her in an immediate, tactile way. These images indirectly inform her voice-over and, by extension, the beginnings of her establishment of a selfhood. The first is an image of Chaplin’s Tramp staring out at the Statue of Liberty, seen in the eyeline match of the second image. In the third image, the police tie a group of immigrants together with a rope, effectively canceling out the symbol of liberty generated in the previous image.
What is striking, perhaps shocking, about the second of these images in this sequence is the startling appearance of a silhouetted human hand pointing to the Statue in Chaplin’s film, almost as if to say the events plotted in Chaplin’s film might be undone with the intervention of a hand (echoing Linda’s own intervention in the telling of Malick’s film). Linda’s viewing of this film is thus no autonomous appreciation of an artwork, then; her aesthetic experience of film, a new experience that, alongside her experience as a laborer adjusting to the mechanisms of new industry, is bound up with the shocks of modernity, connected with the people and society around her (literally, in the sense that the shadow of a hand interferes with the projection of the film) and as such is of a piece with her perceptual engagement with the world around her in other scenes in the film. In this sequence, cinema is seen to be deeply involved in life (as both a material medium and, in Chaplin’s film, in terms of its content), available within the act of reception to a tactile re-inscription that might make a meaning derived from film useful within a given sphere, and the sequence thus provides some evidence that Malick understands his own film as having the potential to resonate in a similarly polysemic way.

In this, both Badlands and, to a greater extent, Days of Heaven, establish the cinema as a site not for passive acceptance, but rather for social dialogue. The films insist upon the imagination and creativity of their young narrators in these sequences, who invest in these moving images (and, for Linda, in all of what she perceives) an expressive significance that is a crucial first step towards the overcoming of subjective isolation that is the result of the loss of the metaphysical unity. This is an isolation that in Days of Heaven is carefully historicized in relation to the atomization felt through the industrial
mode of production to which the itinerant laborers are forced to adapt. Malick, too, in reflexively emphasizing that Holly’s and Linda’s experience of moving images shares something with our experience of his films’ discursive tracks, reminds us that our watching of these films is an opportunity to overcome our own subjective isolation in attributing to the perceived world an expressive, and social, significance. In the next section I want to show how Malick uses this idea not only as thematic material, then, but also as a formal principle of *Days of Heaven*. In particular, I want to approach this idea, and deepen our sense of what the film has to say about its young narrator’s experience of modernity, by probing into the notion of *Days of Heaven* as a fictional world. What does it mean to perceive – and create – a fictional world?

**A Felt Unity: Worlds Viewed in *Days of Heaven***

The conventional understanding of “film world” is the concept of the diegesis, or what David Bordwell terms “the fictional world of a story,” consisting of all of its representations and the stylistic devices used to create them. To some extent, this is the register in which I have used the phrase “fictional world” throughout this study, yet I have also suggested that Malick’s cinema (the films themselves and his narrators) performs an intervention into the world, that is, they continually remind us that the finished film, the representation of a world as it is depicted on-screen, could be otherwise. Malick’s “fictional world” is thus, in a sense, always several worlds. To clarify this idea, and to use it in relation to a further analysis of the voice in *Days of Heaven*, it is worth interrogating how this very notion of the film’s “fictional world”
might be expanded beyond the notion of a single diegesis, in order to allow for multiplicity.

Daniel Yacavone, in an exploration of the divergent work of the philosophers Nelson Goodman and Mikel Dufrenne, has suggested that a given film’s “world” may be understood in two interrelated senses. The first (which he develops through a reading of Goodman’s philosophy) is the *represented* world, or *symbolic* order, of the created art work, and the second is the *expressed* world of the aesthetic object (developed through a reading of Dufrenne). In the first of these types of artistic worlds, the represented world, “worldmaking…is above all a process of ‘re-making’…whereby the worlds of existing art works (and other relevant symbolic worlds or world systems), and the conventions that they have established, are transformed via a particular style into a new artistic world, one which a work ‘exemplifies’ in the sense of being a ‘sample’ of that world[.]

For Yacavone, as for Goodman, “the pre-existing building materials for the creation of art worlds are all the symbolic world-versions of reality, both artistic and non-artistic, available to the artist at a given time and place.”

This set of discursive possibilities for creating a world parallels my earlier discussion of Cavell’s “automatisms,” and for Yacavone deepens our sense of how films simultaneously partake of reality (through recording and representation) and function autonomously from reality in the difference that a particular director’s use of symbolic, discursive means marks relative to other existing forms of film practice. As Yacavone writes, “a filmmaker must struggle to create an artistically interesting, two-dimensional cinematic world from the three-dimensional things and beings appearing before the camera; in the completed film these things and
beings may be recognisable as themselves (i.e. as they exist outside the film), and yet they are also profoundly transformed into something other within it.”

Goodman’s idea of an art world is, then, close to the conception of “diegesis” in film studies, but for Goodman, the art work’s represented world is not simply a representation of reality, but a discursive re-ordering of that reality, achieved through the creation of a symbolic order that comprises both the particularity of a single artistic world (whether this be the represented fictional world of a book, a painting, or a film) and that single world’s relation to – and difference from – other worlds (the real world, and the world of other art works).

This differential quality of an artistic, symbolic world, although in one sense a complete and finished product, stakes out a relation with the world not only through “these things and beings” which it uses to create its own fiction, but also through the spectator’s immersive experience with the film world. This leads to a second way Yacavone understands the notion of a “film world,” developed from the work of Dufrenne. For Dufrenne, a given object may be both an artwork and an aesthetic object. As artwork, it functions in Goodman’s sense, as a finished work that, through its symbolic, discursive means, establishes its autonomy and its difference relative to the existing world. An aesthetic object, however, is not only this already finished, represented world. It is also an expressed world, “the art work as it is concretely experienced…the first and most primary of a (potential) series of removals from empirical reality and the quotidian that the aesthetic object effectuates in and through the beholder’s attitude towards it, one which endows its experience with a quality of self-
enclosure and immersion.” If the artwork is constituted by a unity, the aesthetic object is held together, in experience, by what Dufrenne calls a “felt” unity, in which the various perceptions of the world are unified (if only tentatively) under the sign of an expression ascribed to them by an individual spectator.33

For Yacavone, then, the experience of the film object by the spectator is a kind of re-making of the original symbolic work of the filmmakers, an experience through which new expressive significance emerges from the ordering of sensuous materials. Importantly, Dufrenne’s understanding of an expressed world relies on certain elements of what for Goodman constitutes the represented world, that is, the symbolic (or stylistic) elements of the work which are also a key part of the spectator’s affective experience of the artistic world. We can be, after all, affected as deeply by film form as by film character or content. For Yacavone and for myself in what follows, this connection leads to an understanding of film experience in which our understanding of film style and our understanding of film character become closely linked:

The objective/subjective duality marking the viewer’s experience of a film’s world . . . in some cases mirrors the duality between objective and subjective time within its represented or fictional world, that is, time as it is experienced by its characters. And this affective link may serve as one of the main routes of immersion into its unique, expressed world. Yet although the expressed time, as well as space, of a film world intuited by the viewer is not a purely formal property of a work, but is partly articulated through and by its represented characters and situations, the affective relation between them and the viewer is
something deeper and broader than a specific identification (emotional or otherwise) with a character’s thoughts, feelings, or actions. It is instead a consequence of a shared world-feeling that the film world expresses and which, with respect to representation, may be seen to provide the intuited ‘existential’ context within which the characters think, feel, and act.34

Malick’s work, particularly from *Days of Heaven* onwards, is an ideal example of this immersive, existential link between character and viewer. In Yacavone’s terms above, an understanding of character is not reducible to the notions of stable subjectivity and character psychology which have informed the making of most standardized cinema. Instead, a viewer’s understanding of character emerges from “a shared world-feeling,” or a shared space, which occurs through an experience of the symbolic conventions (the film’s style) which make up the film’s represented world. The viewer’s experience and the character’s experience cannot be the same, of course, because the character is not simply represented within the film’s fictional world (in Goodman’s sense) but is also expressed through our own experiential understanding of the world on the screen, given that character in cinema is always constituted by the same stylistic, symbolic conventions that express other aspects of the film’s world. The voice-over, as discussed earlier, is one of these conventions. In terms which evoke the discussion of Bakhtin at the end of my third chapter, this shared space between viewer and character becomes, for the viewer, a recognition of the character’s purchase on making meaning in the world, the meaning the characters attributes to the (affecting) world which she encounters; yet the character, as also a stylistic entity composed through image and sound, becomes a constitutive part of
the viewer’s own expressed world, the unique significance that each embodied viewer of Malick’s cinema brings to an experience of his work.

The voice-over, then, is a privileged example of an element of film that serves to both represent (it lets us know something of a character represented in the film’s represented, fictional world, no matter how tentative that something is in terms of the character’s overall becoming) and express, given that a voice-over is also a key component of the rhythms and movements making up the film’s potential for stylistic expressivity. Yet these ideas about film worlds also connect to *Days of Heaven* in an even more specific way because they relate to the experience of modernity depicted in the film. Goodman’s and Dufrenne’s closely intertwined concepts reflect two different kinds of philosophical aesthetics. For Goodman, an analytic philosopher who, tellingly, does not discuss cinema in his work on worldmaking, the unity of the artwork, and its autonomy from the outer world, is most important. In this way his thinking can be seen to emerge from the traditional notion of the aesthetic within philosophy, which focuses on the *distance* between viewer and aesthetic object. Dufrenne, meanwhile, who often discussed the cinema, is more characteristic of a continental tradition wherein the *closeness* of the viewer to the aesthetic work is more characteristic of the way in which the arts are considered in the age of mechanical reproduction, particularly in the work of Walter Benjamin, who sees the invention of film as collapsing the “aura,” or distance, once felt between viewer and art work in aesthetic experience. Fittingly, Dufrenne often discusses the aesthetic object’s “expressed world” as essentially similar to the worlds we encounter in our everyday lives, which Yacavone for his part makes clear when he
suggests that Dufrenne’s concept of “felt” unity “characterises the experienced worlds of art works . . . as it characterises the concrete experience of our everyday life-world(s).”

In other words, even if the film, as a work, is a finished entity, an autonomous object closed off from our further acts of creativity and thus distant from us, a film’s world is one we become increasingly closer to as we begin to ascribe our own expressed meaning to what we see. Distance here is collapsed in our experience of the film, in which the distance between us and the represented world on the screen gradually decreases as we begin to undergo a haptic relation to the film’s sensuous world, ascribing our own expressive significance through that relation.

The spectator’s experience of this collapse in distance is, of course, is not an inherent property of modern, or even strictly cinematic, technology itself, but rather a potential property of cinema that is expressed poetically in Malick’s film. Within its “represented world,” or diegesis, modern technology – the projection of The Immigrant aside – is frequently unable to collapse distances and create dialogues between individuals; instead, frequently technology is felt to be alienating and atomizing. Malick invites us to view the workers as a collective, using long shots to contextualize their labor as the labor of a group of people rather than only the labor of individuals. This unity, however, is not felt within the film itself; more often than not the workers are at odds with each other (for example, in the brawl early in the film in which Bill finds himself defending Abby’s honor to another worker). The Farmer keeps his distance from his workers; the modern medicine which helps assuage his illness is inaccessible to the laborers (Bill must steal medicine in order to tend to Abby’s calloused hands); and at
other times the Farmer is shown using his telescope to observe his employees from the vantage point of the lawn in front of his mansion, focusing in on Abby in particular, who he admires as an aesthetic object elsewhere in the film (their relationship is depicted by Malick as ethereal, distant, and spiritual rather than close and corporeal, whereas Abby and Bill’s relationship tends to work on both of these registers early in the film). And it is, of course, the hellish experience of the Chicago steel mill in the film’s first sequence which sends Bill, Abby, and Linda to the Panhandle in the first place.

But even if uses of modern technology in the represented world of *Days of Heaven* often serves to create or exacerbate differences between characters and their world, the film itself, and Linda’s own expressed world is often felt to collapse this distance. Linda, in a sense, takes her cue from Chaplin and “uses” the technology of the film, as its narrator, as an opportunity to inscribe her relationship to what she (and we) see on the screen (an opportunity *not* available to her through the technology depicted in the film’s actual represented world). Her own “expressed world” is achieved not within the world she lives in (examples of this sort of expressed world can be found in Abby’s experience, as when she writes down her thoughts in a drawing room provided by the Farmer in the second half of the film), but rather through her voice-over, which is part of the stylistic texture of the film itself. If this collapse of distance cannot be felt within the depiction of technology within the film’s represented world, one of its salient *expressed* worlds – a “felt” unity – emerges from the intertwined experiences of Malick’s viewers and Linda herself. Linda’s narration emblemizes both the collapse of distance in an experience of cinema and the related overcoming of subjective isolation. The film’s
narration, not acting as author to produce the images we see on the screen but rather inscribing meaning to them, is thus informed by the idea of cinema as a potential site for dialogical expression. Linda’s narration does not unify the events we see on screen into a finished whole, but rather gives us the feeling of this young girl’s attempt to express a meaning in relation the world she encounters. What we see in *Days of Heaven* is not simply a represented “fictional world,” in Goodman’s sense, to which we and the characters are fully present. Instead, always looking at what we see from irreducibly contingent and singularly embodied perspectives, the film’s drama suggests instead *many* expressed worlds, each character offering different kinds of “felt unity,” visions of meaning which not only do not coalesce, but at times actively conflict with one another.

To understand the quality of Linda’s expressed world, it is important to understand it relative to the other expressions characters create in relation to the film’s represented world. The Farmer, for example, at times engages with his land in a direct, tactile manner (in one shot, he is shown blowing cotton out of his hand), allowing Malick and Shepherd to create the character as something of a fragile soul despite the fact that he also functions, within the narrative scheme, as the capitalist landowner who oppresses the group of itinerant workers. Linda herself is receptive to both of these meanings: at one moment she remarks upon the inequality of the social situation created by the Farmer (“This farmer, he had a big spread and a lot of money. Whoever was sitting in the chair when he’d come around, why’d they stand up and give it to him?”) and yet also attributes to him a certain gentleness, perhaps a byproduct of his terminal illness (“Wasn’t no harm in him. You’d give him a flower, he’d keep it forever. He was headed for the boneyard...
any minute”). Malick is careful to show us, however, that Linda’s attribution of a psychology to the Farmer is only her own inference, and that in some respects the film shows him to be shaping his own narrative. His telescope, placed outside his mansion on the top of the hill, is one form of mediation through which he ascribes significance to what he sees. Early in the film, he notices Abby laboring on his land, and wants to learn more about her. His way of knowing her, of attributing a significance to her, is his gaze. Fixing on her through his telescope, he individuates her from the background (which includes other members of the social class to which she belongs and with which she labors) and invests in her his own private desire. To some extent, Malick’s own film shares the Farmer’s gaze; the director’s images, of course, produce what the Farmer sees, and Malick’s own narrative insists on Abby as a uniquely beautiful individual, distinct in some ways from her social class. But Malick just as often insists on Abby as part of a collective group, too, and this is what the Farmer’s own narrative doesn’t include. Although Malick does not make clear the Farmer’s motivations, we can infer the Farmer’s love is for Abby as an individual, and not as a way through which to understand the body of persons subjected to the social system he reproduces in microcosm on his land.

Bill, too, has his own narrative, or expressed world, one which is not so much mediated by technology (as are Malick’s and the Farmer’s own narratives), but represented only by his repeated desire to make good on “the American dream,” a phrase suitable to the vague nature of Bill’s own goals. This takes several forms throughout the film; we might say Bill has several versions of the same narrative. In one, it is as the
patriarchal protector of Abby’s honor, justifying the decision to deceive the Farmer out of his money because of the abjection Abby is made to suffer while working (“I hate it to see you stooped over out there, them looking at your ass like you’re a whore”); in another, it is in a vague goal to find success on the East Coast at some undetermined point in the future (“It’s only for awhile,” Bill says, rationalizing his decision to encourage Abby to marry the farmer, “Then we’ll go to New York,” he promises her); and in yet another, it is a narrative that apparently has already ended, as he tells the Farmer during one of their few sustained conversations (“And one day you wake up, you find you’re not the smartest guy in the world. Never gone come up with the big score.”). Unlike the Farmer, Bill does not possess the wherewithal, even temporarily, to realize the fantasies embedded in his expression of the world; unlike Linda, he does not have the privileged position of retrospective narration through which to make sense of the past events we see him experience in the story. Despite occupying the position of the male protagonist so familiar from much standardized cinema, Bill is in many ways the least able to articulate and record his understanding of experience, given that his desire to achieve prosperity, his one goal, is left unaccomplished at the end of the film.

But Linda’s narrative more directly mediates the film which we are presently watching. Linda is, in some ways, as limited as Holly in Badlands in her ability to make meaning of the events of her past. The drawl of her voice and her broken syntax suggests a lack of an opportunity for education, a lack clearly explained by her existence as an impoverished laborer with no real prospects for the future, at least at the beginning of the film. But in many respects, although Linda is, like Holly, an isolated character, she makes
a greater attempt to imaginatively understand her past experience and to connect with others through that understanding. And that it is her past that preoccupies her is apparent from the very first sentence in the film’s voice-over: “Me and my brother, it just used to be me and my brother. He used to amuse us.” As James Morrison and Timothy Schur have pointed out, this line – and Linda’s voice-over throughout the film, which flows from it – makes “clear that the real emotional undercurrent of Linda’s monologue concerns her feeling of increasing isolation, her growing separation from her brother.”

This voice-over thus appears to exist in, and to reflect upon, two different temporal frames at once: within the fictional history Linda recounts for us, the voice points to her separation from her brother (Bill is shown to spend far more time with Abby, giving each of his moments spent with Linda a feeling of elegiac poignancy). However, it also reminds us that in the point in the future during which Linda recounts her story for us, her brother has already died. Linda is here attempting to make sense of the isolation she felt in relation to her brother during the last days of his life, and also in relation to her separation from her brother after his death. All of this reminds us again that the voice of our narrator stands not for a static subject fixed in time – she is not Chion’s acousmêtre – but rather a subject still engaged in her own process of becoming, of which coping with her brother’s death is a key aspect.

Thus, as Morrison and Schur have suggested, although Linda is an isolated character, “she is the one who longs most deeply for contact” in her expressions, contact not only with her brother (although it is perhaps that relationship, and her loss of it, which initiates her desire for contact) but with others in the film. Her close, tactile relationship
with the landscape is the closest in the film to paralleling Malick’s own freely moving camera. In this, and in her attempt to overcome the isolation Cavell sees as inherent in modernity (an isolation which this film particularizes through the loss of her brother, and historicizes through the isolating, alienating effects of the mass labor depicted in the film), Linda is a Cavellian subject more than any other agent in the film. She is such a subject not only in her viewing of the Chaplin film but also in her very narration, viewing the phenomena she encounters in Malick’s film in ways paralleling our viewing, as potentially Cavellian spectators, of his images. For example, Linda invests others in her world with significance not through any access to their “true” psychologies or histories, but through her own private ways of making meaning. She infers things about the psychology and motivation of other characters that are not otherwise affirmed within the diegesis, thus attempting to become close to characters (even if in only on an imaginative register) that, in the drama itself, she remains relatively isolated from. Linda projects a psychology onto the reticent character of the Farmer, as she observes him admiring Abby: “This farmer, he didn’t know when he first saw her, or what it was about her. Maybe it was the way the wind blew through her hair.” Morrison and Schur have pointed out that this instance of the voice-over, and others like it, “give us little grounding in the plot…the question of how Linda has come by the information she so blithely imparts is left unanswered.”38 Her observations never firmly situated in the plot, Linda’s observations strike us instead as attempts to overcome isolation and become close to other characters (but through a mode of historical retrospection, given that her voice-over exists at some uncertain point in the future).
Notice how in the previous example Linda simultaneously projects a psychology onto the Farmer and at the same time makes an observation about Abby (her hair blowing through the wind) that may be more her own than the Farmer’s. In this respect, I argue that Linda is not merely subject to the isolation which she has felt (in both the past of the fictional world depicted on the screen and in the present of her existence as a narrating agent) but is more active in contentiously shaping her own history, a history which might allow her to become closer to events and characters that she was at some distance from during the past. In this sense, Linda is the polar opposite of Kit in *Badlands*. Whereas he disavowed the death and the dying, refusing to overcome skepticism by granting others historical significance, Linda’s narration – beginning as it does with marking her isolation from her brother, and with retrospectively making sense of the death of both her brother and the Farmer – is motivated by making sense of history, and the history of others, after an experience of loss.

In one sense, then, the death of Bill has an effect on Linda that is similar to the effect the stereopticon has on Holly in *Badlands*. Each prompts a reflection upon the death of an older authorial figure (in *Badlands* Holly is reminded of her deceased mother while viewing the stereopticon); each calls them to recognize their own finite existence in history and, in the absence of a guiding authorial figure, their opportunity to shape their own sense of self within that history. Within each film, the loss of the authorial or parental figure – despite its poignant aspects – thus also generates a certain degree of optimism, especially in *Days of Heaven*, in which Bill’s loss, at least retrospectively, may
perhaps be framed as an opportunity for Linda to begin to articulate an original discourse outside of the authorial patriarchal figure who has hitherto guided her existence.

These three expressed worlds in *Days of Heaven* suggest three different ways of looking, being in, and expressing the significance of the fictional world comprised by Malick’s images. We might even add additional expressions: Abby, for example, tells Linda of her past experience, spending her childhood wrapping cigarettes in dimly lit factories; the Farmer’s foreman exists to protect his employer’s land, viewing Bill and Abby with suspicion and setting into motion the events which end in the end of Bill’s life at the end of the film. All of these interconnected narratives suggest that the filmed world of *Days of Heaven* in fact consists more deeply of many different kinds of expressed worlds which are at times at odds; for example, the Foreman’s actions at the end of the film puts to an end Bill’s crafting of his personal narrative, while the Farmer’s desire for Abby is met by Linda’s observation, elsewhere in the narration, that the social situation on his land is far from equal, and by Malick’s own images, which insist on Abby as both an individual and a part of a social collective. What makes each of these narratives felt as separate and distinct from one another relates again to the very source of Cavell’s idea of modern skepticism: the loss of metaphysical or religious unity which might give to human actions a collective, unified purpose. D.N. Rodowick, in discussing Cavell’s work, has discussed the origin of modern skepticism, writing that

the subject became modern when, its anchors being cast loose from moral and epistemological dogma, expressions of doubt and its overcoming became questions of the self in relation to its perceptions. No longer assured of its place in
the world or in relation to the world, the subject is provoked by new strategies of self-actualization and self-invention. The modern ethical dilemma, then, is how to regain contact with this world, to overcome our distance from it and restore its knownness to us.\(^3^9\)

Malick insists on dogma’s failure in modernity early in the film’s first act. Outside the Farmer’s mansion, shortly after the arrival of the itinerant workers on the land, a church service “unites” the workers, the Farmer, and the foreman in spiritual worship. But Malick’s editing strategies emphasize not a true group coming together in an act of worship animating a larger cultural or metaphysical meaning, but rather a series of medium and close shots of several smaller groups and individuals who happen to be standing together but who are not functioning in any authentic manner as a collective.

The ethical dilemma Rodowick limns from this state of affairs is dealt with by Linda in the film, who in her way notes the inequality of the social situation which exists on the Farmer’s land and whose empathetic understanding of other characters reflects a willingness to understand their perspectives. (At other times, of course, she seems more judgmental: the apocalyptic motifs which dot her narration suggest that everyone will be judged in the end, but Linda herself abstains from such judging). But more to the point, Rodowick’s interpretation of Cavell’s skepticism suggests the ethical obligation at the heart of the making of *Days of Heaven* itself: this is not a film that creates a “world” but one which insists on the ongoing creation of the world, indeed many worlds, open to further contestation and change.
But what of our expressed world, the world we as viewers construct in making our own meaning of Malick’s images? As the above section has suggested, Linda’s is just one of many distinct expressed worlds in the film, although it is perhaps the most salient of these. Further, her expressed world, despite its privileged position as a voice-over narration, does not fix or determine the meaning of the film for us. There is, in a sense, the promise of meaning left over, a surplus value of significance that the viewer is left to grapple with. In the conclusion to this chapter, I would like to suggest that certain themes which Days of Heaven introduces, but which are not entirely finalized by any of the expressed worlds in the film, may reverberate within Malick’s larger world, that is, within his whole oeuvre. In particular, the themes of moral judgment (new to Malick’s filmography in Days of Heaven) and the break between character and natural landscape are introduced but are never quite resolved; they linger. In their lingering they become a crucial part of the expressed world we form after viewing Days of Heaven. It is our relationship with Linda’s narration, and its emergence from her position at a transitional moment in American modernity, that most forcefully suggests that the expressions which Days of Heaven gives rise to will reverberate throughout Malick’s next two films.

**Our Expressed World: Linda as Storyteller**

To understand the nature of the significance we as viewers make in relation to Malick’s represented world, it is worth exploring further the nature of Linda’s narration in Days of Heaven. Janet Wondra, pointing to Linda’s engagement with her narrated past in the form of the voice-over, has suggested:
As the freight train chosen by the adults steams into the future, Linda’s narration snatches at the past. Because she is a child, she must go where adults take her and put her life together piecemeal from what she is given and can find around her: childhood as hand-me-down, or perhaps childhood as crazy quilt, since Linda makes the hand-me-down pieces into a pattern very much her own, creating what might be called a co-text.

Linda’s own story is achieved through what Wondra calls a “gathering gaze” that operates both within the narration itself and within Linda’s behavior on the film’s visual track; this is a gaze which seeks not to master, objectify, and thus demystify phenomena, but rather to register the world haptically and impressionistically. As Wondra indicates, even if she cannot master the overarching direction of her life (it is Bill who chooses to take his sister and Abby to the Panhandle at the beginning of the film, and Abby who enrolls Linda in school at the end), she still has agency through which to make meaning out of what, at any moment, surrounds her. In this she is, in a sense, another viewer of the film, like us registering impressions of what is given in the images and constructing, in a parallel to our own, a sense of their significance.

Throughout we see Linda engaged with the physical world around her – as when she guides her hand along the wheatfields in the Panhandle early in the film, for example, reminding us that her engagement with the world is not limited only to the fulfillment of her expected social role of itinerant laborer. (In another scene, we see a similar engagement as she lowers her ear to the ground and wonders aloud to us through voice-over whether or not she might be a “mud doctor,” a novel creation of a profession that
might afford her a more open relationship with the land on which she works). By virtue of her sensitive relationship to the landscape around her, Linda is very close to her director. The camera Malick and Almendros (and Haskell Wexler, who shot some sequences after Almendros left the production) used in making *Days of Heaven*, although producing images which cannot be understood as originating wholly from Linda’s narration, seems to function metaphorically with its own kind of haptic, sensual, “gathering gaze” that is characteristic of all of Malick’s films, presenting images of nature that frequently operate independently of, or extend beyond, the narration and the perceptual experience of the characters. There is, for example, a kind of terrible aesthetic beauty in the sequences depicting the back-breaking labor the itinerants are made to endure. This quality is emphasized further by the fact that Malick and his collaborators chose to shoot much of the film during the so-called “magic hour,” right before sunset, resulting in a cinematographic beauty that for some of the film’s first critics, expecting an efficiently constructed narrative, was a distraction.41 This observation supports what Morrison and Schur have said in regards to the film: “Again and again, we are reminded of the difference between what we are shown and what the characters see, yet ultimately we are denied the satisfaction of feeling ourselves privileged observers who are allowed to understand what the characters cannot.”42 Yet even if the significance ascribed to phenomena by Malick (and by us) is different than the significance ascribed by his characters, both remain rooted in a fundamentally shared ground, that is, immediate, sensuous experience. Linda is more responsive to this kind of immediate experience than any other character in the film.
This close relationship between Malick’s imagery and Linda’s narration gives Linda’s expressed world a privileged place in our viewing of the film. Linda’s “co-text” emerges from a relationship to the sensuous environment around her that is closer to Malick’s own than that of any other character. In this way, *Days of Heaven* positions Linda as both part of another storyteller’s story and something of a storyteller herself. Her narration functions for us a reflection upon the way in which the phenomenon of storytelling is implicated with attempts to understand history, and as such is a phenomenon with special stakes in the context of his character’s experience of agrarian America’s transition to industrialized modernity. It is, too, our understanding of Linda as a storyteller alongside Malick that will allow us to consider the kind of “co-text” Malick’s viewers are able to produce in viewing Malick’s film. In other words, the notion of Linda as a storyteller allows us to think through what we are left with after the story has been told to us.

Walter Benjamin, and the earlier discussion of aesthetic experience in the age of modernity, becomes important here again. In many respects, the idea of an “expressed world” is one way of expressing Benjamin’s famous dictum that mechanical reproduction collapses the distance between viewer and observed which was once felt in the arts. Yet this loss of distance on one level does not result in the destruction of the aesthetic altogether. For Esther Leslie, Benjamin’s work, even after his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” – insisting as it does on the destruction of the traditional “aura” surrounding the work of art in modern experience – makes room for
a kind of aesthetic experience after the decline of aura, and in a way that complements our earlier discussion of expressed worlds. She suggests that film for Benjamin scents possibilities of a post-bourgeois object . . . This technical multiple does not squash out authentic experience but translates it into object-forms and forms of experience appropriate for a modern age. These forms, like the forms that cradled craft, fan a spark of life that is integrated harmoniously with labor. Damaged life may heal itself, through tapping recuperative energies vented in industrial culture.43

For Leslie, as for Benjamin, any “mass-reproduced copy can be manipulated. It is ‘tactile.’ Tactility, the ability to touch, are sensuous concepts that relate new art to the physical presence of the collectively receiving body.”44 In this, Leslie’s specific point about Benjamin’s insistence on the relationship between perceptual experience and the body in the twentieth century echoes “the modernity thesis” within film studies on a broader level, which argues that the shocks of experience in modernity are paralleled in the percussive rhythms of certain cinematic practices, particularly those which harness the cinema’s ability to break down and then reconstitute action and animate it across different frames, shots, and sequences. Malick’s occasional tendency to craft a film style echoes the disjunctive rhythms and syncopations of modernity – a tendency which, of course, must always be put into relation with his equally salient insistence on both the contemplative dimension of single images and the ability of cinema to tell a continuous story. His approach also sets the fundamental ground for the experiences of his characters within the development of that same modernity, which occurs in different registers in
each of the films for a variety of reasons (not least of which is the fact that each of Malick’s characters exists at a different nodal point in the history of twentieth century modernity and that each of them emerge from varying socioeconomic and cultural situations).

Linda’s haptic impressions of the world are not only of the preindustrial agrarian world that surrounds the modern machinery that harvests the Farmer’s land, then; they also constitute an encounter with the very modernity encroaching upon that land, an encounter that takes place from a privileged position that no other character in the film is felt to occupy. In some sequences we get a sense of both of these kinds of encounters at once. Early in the film, for example, Linda runs alongside Abby as the latter struggles to keep up with the threshing machines from which she must collect wheat. It may take two viewings of this sequence to realize that Linda is not exactly working; she is running alongside Abby, her function in this labor not exactly clear. This sequence suggests the liminal position, largely due to her age, that Linda occupies within this system of work inaugurated by the dawning of modernity on this agrarian land. She is able to understand intimately both the pleasures and pain available within it because she experiences both, at times simultaneously. Malick’s own narration (the production and juxtaposition of his imagery and sounds, which exist in relation to but relatively autonomously from Linda’s voice) clearly occupies a similar liminal point: in the same sequence, Malick, like Linda, remains caught up with the labor, concerned as the film is with conveying to the audience the struggle of her work (the camera gets close enough to Abby during the sequence to let us know something of the physical pain she must endure to keep up with this demanding
activity), but like Linda it also appears relatively free. The film shifts away from Abby to other phenomena in the landscape (for example, Malick cuts from Abby working to shots of other workers engaged in their own labor, as well as animals which see their habitat destroyed as human labor pushes its machinery through it). Here Malick is not so much analyzing space in the mode of classical filmmakers as he is breaking up that space in order to produce new juxtapositions and relations that are not always felt within the diegesis. But this arrangement of imagery also functions as it does because of its close relationship to its young narrator, who in a similar way moves freely (at least relative to the adults more thoroughly bound up with the social and economic system depicted in the film) across the film’s landscape, first gathering up what she sees and only then attempting to craft her own expression out of what has been gathered.

Linda’s position within the film, although in part the result of her age, is thus also a position open to a degree of resistance to the social system as it exists for the adults; like Malick’s own filmmaking strategy on this film, discussed earlier, her position exists somewhere between labor and contemplative leisure, and this is a central idea in relation to the narration she and the film itself produce. To discuss further Linda’s share of the story being told in *Days of Heaven*, her expressed world as it emerges from this point of resistance, it is worthwhile to situate her narration in relation to Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller,” for the resistance to the rationalization of the industrial age informing the film is also a preoccupation of Benjamin’s essay. Benjamin’s reflections are situated around the case study of Nikolai Leskov, a Russian writer whose stories for Benjamin remind us that narrative art is rooted in real-life experience, and in our abilities to
exchange with others the meanings of those experiences. As Benjamin discusses in the essay, Leskov’s stories feature working craftsmen, such as silversmiths, and their narrative structure insists on the craftlike nature of narrative form as an art. For Benjamin, Leskov’s narratives serve as a reminder of how the traditional aspects of storytelling begin to wane in a modern period obsessed with efficiently delivered information. Benjamin’s understanding of storytelling, in opposition to this obsession, emphasizes storytelling as a craft rooted in, reflecting, and transmitting experience, and in this a story is not a product to be consumed but a form of productive, communal work involving the participation of the listener as well as the teller. As Benjamin puts it:

The storytelling that thrives . . . in the milieu of work – the rural, the maritime, and the urban – is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel.  

Storytelling, in Benjamin’s sense, here does not simply involve the efficient transmission of information from a teller to a listener, but rather marks a transmission of experience which gives the listener equal stake in the constitution of the significance of the story. In this a story – like a product created through craft, rather than the purely aesthetic creation of an auratic work of art – becomes useful (although not instrumental, in the pejorative sense) in that it achieves new life in the experience of the listener. This focus on usefulness does not mean that the story has a predigested message, ideological or
otherwise, nor that it is unrelated to the aesthetic, but that it bestows upon the listener a sense of freedom in productively working with the teller to construct the meaning of a story, and to carry that meaning forward into the future, for “the more completely it is integrated into [the listener’s] own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later.” It is this creative, dialogical bond between teller and listener occurring in the phenomenological act of telling a story that defines storytelling as storytelling and acts as a site of resistance to the modern phenomenon of information, which asks for no significant, content-shaping contribution on the part of the listener. Benjamin’s notion of storytelling thus deeply opposes the phenomena of “information” and all other forms of destructive rationalization, for while the modern media’s delivery of information attempts simply to deliver the meaning of world events as a consumable whole to listeners and viewers, storytelling understands, and indeed cherishes, the fact that every story will leave an excess of meaning that becomes commensurate in different, unpredictable ways within the contingent experiences of different listeners engaged with narratives.

Particular examples from the film can further illustrate how Days of Heaven establishes Linda’s expressed world, and Malick’s own film, as an instance of Benjaminian storytelling. Viewers of the film are presented a surplus insuring that her story is not given to us as a whole piece of “information” that can simply be processed, but rather functioning as a story which is only one element in our own imaginative, interpretive reconstruction of the events we see in the film. In the film’s first sequence, a depiction of the Chicago steel mill from which Bill, Abby, and Linda flee after Bill kills,
in an act of self defense, the mill foreman, *Days of Heaven* begins to establish both Linda’s perspective of past events and the film’s own haptic way of investigating filmic space. The first three shots of the steel mill serve a conventional purpose in introducing us to two of the film’s central protagonists, Bill and Abby; they also establish for us the Chicago setting in which the film will only briefly be set. But these establishing shots also serve a larger purpose within the narrative context of this particular film, given that to establish the setting of the mill is also to establish at the same time that Bill and Abby are not simply individual protagonists, but also members of a larger, oppressed social class, given that we see other women (in the film’s second shot which depicts Abby gathering detritus near a stream next to the mill) and other men (in the film’s third shot, which includes other men working in the steel mill alongside Bill) performing the same tasks that here characterize our protagonists. Of course, neither of these characters offers any evidence that they are aware of the collective (albeit highly gendered) nature of their struggle; our sense in this sequence, as in others later in the film, is that, apart from an intimate circle of relations, human beings in this fictional world remain apart, cleaved from any sense of a larger social significance.

We might also observe how the camera in this opening sequence establishes other meanings that resonate across the film. In addition to giving us some sense of the social situation from which his characters emerge, Malick’s camera also gives us a particularly vivid sense of how the labor members of this milieu are made to perform *feels*. In one striking shot, the camera follows Bill in a circle as he shovels steel into a furnace, calling upon us to sympathize with the nature of his toil through a camera movement that closely
follows the rhythms of that work. In other shots, the soundtrack plays a significant role, at times drowning out the dialogue between Bill and the foreman (pointing to how the mechanized system of the steel mill occludes a possible relationship between members of different social classes) and at times matching that dialogue in rhyme, almost as if to suggest that human agency within this building becomes simply another cog in the industrial machine. (In one shot, the foreman calls out to a worker – “hey, you” – and we see neither the foreman nor the man to which he calls, but rather a massive steel machine, which like the foreman and the worker is simply one more part of the mechanized process depicted). We might also note, as Gilberto Perez does in a reading of the film, how this sequence introduces one of this film’s important recurring figures, the motif of apocalyptic imagery (which Linda draws particular attention to in her narration). Through such imagery, the fire of the steel mill functions not simply as an indexical marker of what an actual steel mill looks like, but also as a marker of what the mill on some level feels like, metaphorically “the hell of stoking a furnace in a mill.”

The meaning I have constructed from these initial shots, which establish the steel mill, two of the main protagonists, the social classes from which the protagonists emerge, and Bill’s own experience within the steel mill, exceeds what the first-person narration of the film tells us, or what the same narration can access. Linda, in her voice-over, does not speak of social classes and backbreaking labor; although she is made to labor, she does not labor the same way Bill does, and thus cannot understand what of his experience is understood (or at least felt) by the film’s visual and sonic tracks. Other expressed worlds fail to articulate this experience for us, too: Bill, for his own part, can only express what
such labor means in the clichés of the “American dream” discussed earlier. Yet at the same time her voice-over remains valuable for what it communicates about the experience of being a member of this social class, in a forthrightly immediate way. Linda’s voice-over speaks not of the specific labor in the mill the film investigates on the visual track, but of both her past experiences with her brother and her existence as an itinerant laborer which informs her experiences more generally. Near the end of the sequence, we hear Linda reflecting upon her past with her brother:

We used to do things together. We used to have fun. We used to roam the streets. There was people sufferin’ of pain and hunger. Some people, their tongues were hangin’ out of their mouths . . . [My brother] used to amuse us, he used to entertain us. In fact, all three of us been goin’ places, looking for things, searching for things, goin’ on adventures.

Linda here announces the liminal site of resistance she occupies in the unfolding of the narrative, and indeed in the unfolding of her own life. At once she registers her past with Bill in a childish way, framing their experiences as an “adventure,” almost as if the attempt to simply find food and survive were events out of a dime novel. Yet she also understands the pain of this life she and others have been positioned to lead, observing how members of her social class are made to suffer “of pain and hunger.” Here Linda’s storytelling reflects the receptive, creative engagement with the world (here the ability to understand a painful existence as an adventure) Benjamin’s notion of storytelling requires, in addition to transmitting to us some sense of the impoverished experience she has been accustomed to leading.
What Malick’s film seeks to do is not understand Linda, necessarily, as a source for the meaning of the images (although at moments the film certainly feels like an adventure, or at least an escape, particularly in the first few shots of the Panhandle seen immediately after the more overtly oppressive steel mill). Rather, the film seeks to understand Linda’s expressed world – the story she tells to us – in relation to the larger world, and social system, in which she is inscribed. Linda’s voice-over does not emerge *sui generis*; it is a part of the larger folk culture (including other stories Linda has heard) depicted within the film, in tenuous relation to the industrial technology which at times threatens to overwhelm it. Linda produces her narration well after the time of Nikolai Leskov, in an era in which the erosion of traditional storytelling as posited by Benjamin had already been felt. It is not possible, then, to say that Linda, or Malick, merely recuperate an older form of storytelling, and that somehow this twelve-year old itinerant laborer’s words match the craft of the storytellers Benjamin admires. Yet her *attempt* to tell a story based in real experience within modernity – her gesture, and the film’s gesture, towards Benjamin’s ideal – is what is most important, emerging as it does from her position with a system which allows for some degree of resistance to the instrumentalization inherent in it.

Consider, for another example of such resistance, her first appearance in the film, which comes after the sequence in the mill and before the journey to the Panhandle. As Bill sits with Abby, who lies prostrate and tired on a bed, Linda arranges several yellow flowers and Malick depicts this activity in two subsequent shots (interrupted by the one shot of Bill and Abby). In the first, a medium long-shot, the appeal of the yellow flowers
tends to overwhelm the frame, the salient point of attention for both spectator and character. In the second, tighter medium shot, the focus is on Linda herself, and less on the flowers as an object of beauty but rather this time as an object of and for labor. That these flowers are work for Linda, and not pleasure, is accentuated by Linda’s voice (here in the form of diegetic dialogue), in which she speaks, in her drawl, the following words: “What else do I gotta do today?” Linda’s flower-arranging, located as it is in an interstitial space between craft (the skill necessary to arrange this appealing bouquet of flowers that Malick directs us to notice in the framing of the first shot) and alienated labor (Linda’s exhaustion with the activity, emphasized in the second shot, is surely a necessity for the continued economic survival of the three main characters) reflects her narration itself. The narration incorporates both her vivid imagination (receptive to beauty) yet is motivated, at least in some part, by a greater personal need (that she make sense of her past after the loss of her brother, and thus to overcome her alienation).

Dudley Andrew has suggested that the association of cinema with Benjamin’s notion of storytelling “derails, however, with cinema’s industrial status and accompanying class divisions. Where the storyteller comes out of the society addressed, film producers (studio magnates or governmental bureaucrats, as you choose) invariably represent a class and interests at variance with the masses watching their movies.” Andrew, however, here problematically situates authorship in relationship to only the production of films, reducing expression to a matter of financial backing, and points only to the possibility of associating Benjamin’s concept in relation to the cinema as a totality, rather than to particular instances of film practice, as I have attempted to do here. As a
result, Andrew fails to see the various levels of expressive significance that might be inscribed onto experiences of films from the various nodal points of viewer, character, and director. It may be that Malick’s film is the exception that throws the rule of most Hollywood cinema into relief, and certainly his novel production practice in making *Days of Heaven* is still reliant on a mass industry in a way that marks the film’s difference in relation to its young narrator. In any event, what I have attempted to suggest in the preceding pages is not any essential ontological link between cinema as a mass medium and Benjamin’s conception of storytelling as inherently dialogical and democratic. Instead, we are better positioned to view Malick’s (and his young narrator’s) strategies in *Days of Heaven* as partaking of a set of historically available automatisms in storytelling, in which the telling of a narrative does not so much determine but is rather informed by impressionistic, haptic experience – experience undergoing radical change during the historical period of the film’s setting.

If Linda’s expressed world tells us of her own creative way of resisting the social system thrust upon her, what purchase on meaning, then, is left for the film’s spectators? Telling stories and expressing worlds is not about delivering information; it is about crafting a narrative order that shares one’s own experience, and it is thus crucial to Benjaminian story that there be some room for the making of meaning in the listener’s hearing of the story as well. “The Storyteller” does not contain an explicit theory of the listener’s experience, but Andrew Benjamin has made just this attempt in connecting the concept of the storyteller and the aura to Roland Barthes’ notion of the “third meaning.” The “third meaning” is that level of analysis in the encounter with an object or narrative
located at a point beyond the first two levels, which are, respectively, concerned with the information the object relays to its perceiver and the way in which scientific methods of interpretation can discern the meaning of symbols. The third level of meaning, or what Barthes alternately calls “significance” or an “obtuse meaning,” exceeds that which can be categorized as either informational (strictly the art work’s literal content) or symbolic (the meaning marked out through the science of hermeneutics). Andrew Benjamin explicates Barthes’ concept in order to connect it to Walter Benjamin’s work:

The third meaning is not present in the work of art in any obvious or manifest sense, nor is it reducible either to the presentation of the literal content or to the presentation of symbols. The immediate difficulty is to give a voice to the third meaning. Examples used by Barthes in his discussion of [Eisenstein] always seem to concern an element that, while attracting the eye and demanding interpretation, nonetheless seem to resist an exhaustive explanation. The description of significance will therefore involve displacing the possibility of attributing to the work of art a complete and determinant meaning. Significance is a primordial presence occasioning, if not grounding, the possibility of the continuity of interpretation and hence of reinterpretation. Furthermore, it is a presence that can never be included within the temporality of the instant and therefore the ontology of place, both of which involve the conceptions of time and being proper to the context.49

Andrew Benjamin goes on to note that while this third level of meaning can easily be ignored in any analysis – that is, an analysis which chooses to focus either on the literal
content of the art work or a scientific reading of its symbolic content – the third, or “primordial,” level will nonetheless still lie dormant. The third meaning, never exhaustible within the interpretive context of the present, thus always gestures towards a future context of interpretation (which itself gestures towards yet another future context, and so on). In this, the third meaning remains fundamentally other and thus dialogic; that is, it is not fully reducible to the available hermeneutical methods or agendas of a given context\interpreter, and it is that element pressuring us to recognize that our readings and interpretations are both finite and temporally situated. The auratic, in this sense, is found in an encounter with the aesthetic object that at the same time recognizes the inevitably of a surplus of meaning which will remain after that encounter. It is the specific temporal context of philosophical thinking within history, and the gesture towards the future – that is, the expectation that one’s meaning may be met and refigured in the future – which is auratic in Andrew Benjamin’s reading of Walter Benjamin’s artwork essay. “The experience of the aura,” Andrew Benjamin thus goes on to write, “is an experience of an expectation or a possibility…The fulfillment of the expectation that the other will return ‘our gaze’ is the experience of the aura.”

Just as the auratic third meaning marks an excess guaranteeing both the finite limit of reception and the temporal gesture towards an interpretation in the future, then, so storytelling in Benjamin’s sense leaves room for the work of interpretations to come. As Benjamin writes of the storyteller: “There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis…the more natural the process by which the storyteller foregoes psychological
shading, the greater becomes the story’s claim to a place in the memory of the
listener.\[^{51}\] This sense of leaving a shared space open to future interpretation in the
object is inherent in the creation of aesthetic objects (although creators may or may not
intend for such a space to exist), and possible in the telling of stories which do not
attempt to master a single interpretation to deliver to the reader. While previous critics
have not made this explicit link between Benjamin’s work and Malick’s visual and
narrative style, earlier commentary has set the ground for such a connection. Gordon
Gow suggests in an early review in *Films and Filming* that “Malick has written, with
manifest care, a simplistic off-screen narration outdone in poetic appeal by the pictures he
sets before us, yet Linda Manz delivers the words tellingly.”\[^{52}\] Gow here implies that the
visuals outstrip the narration not in order to show it up, but rather to offer an excess of
visual information beyond that to which Linda understands or refers to, and thus a space
of experience which stands for our share in the dialogue.

Out of this space of experience, and in concluding, I can mark two thematic
motifs which function as a particular site of “excess” in *Days of Heaven*, remaining with
us long after both Malick’s story and Linda’s expressed world have been told to us. These
are the theme of metaphysical truth, and the break between character and landscape.
Linda’s storytelling, to some extent, account for both of these motifs, yet they cannot
fully explain them or close them down; their resonance is left over for us to explain, and I
would like to suggest the best way to do this is to carry them forth into a discussion of
Malick’s next two films, in which they will become key aspects of the stories to be told.
The first of these, the theme of metaphysical truth, is introduced as a motif by Linda
while riding on the train early in the film, taking the form of an observation about moral judgment that extends directly from a story she has been told in the past:

I met this guy named Ding-Dong. He told me the whole earth is goin’ up in flames. Flames will come out of here and there and they’ll just rise up. The mountains are gonna go up in big flames, the water’s gonna rise in flames… There’s gonna be creatures runnin’ every which way, some of them burnt, half of their wings burnin’. People gonna be screamin’ and hollerin’ for help. See, the people that have been good – they’re gonna go to heaven and escape all the fire.

But if you’ve been bad, God don’t even hear you. He don’t even hear you talkin’.

As Lloyd Michaels has suggested, after this monologue the film “proceeds with a dark fatality reminiscent of Greek drama as well as biblical prophesy.”\(^5^3\) Hubert Cohen echoes Michaels’ reading, suggesting that the film functions as a biblical allegory, these lines indicating “that [Linda] is trying to figure out the moral rules that govern the world,” within a film that ultimately, for Cohen, calls upon its audience “to sense the presence of a judgmental and intrusive God.”\(^5^4\) Such a reading is supported also, to some extent, by the film’s title, a reference to Deuteronomy (11:21) warning humanity that the earth will not be theirs to keep should the commandments not be followed. The film’s now famous climax, in which a plague of locusts descends upon the Farmer’s land, provides perhaps the greatest justification for this interpretation. Joan Mellen, for example, writes that the fire appears “as if only a complete purging of will redeem the sickened social order,” framing the film’s suggestion of the intervention of God as a rebuke to humanity’s inability to devise a humane social system.\(^5^5\) Mellen’s observation (and any that wants to
read the presence of divine judgment within the film) is supported by occasional overhead shots during the sequence that suggest the perspective of a deity, and silhouetted images of the characters standing against the fire which abstract their individuality and suggest their place in a larger allegorical narrative. This interpretation of the film’s climax as implying some kind of moral judgment is also felt within the film itself. Linda, for example, tells us in one of the film’s final sequences of Abby’s regret regarding her decision to deceive the Farmer (“She promised herself she’d lead a good life from now on; she blamed it all on herself.”) It is not, then, just film critics who have felt after experiencing the film’s crowning sequence a sense of judgment from on high.

Yet Abby’s feelings about the locust fire – or, more accurately, Linda’s inference about Abby’s feelings about the locust fire – suggests, finally, why reading this sequence as the film’s depiction of divine judgment is available only as one possible reading. The fact that Linda must infer Abby’s moral compunction regarding what has happened reminds us that in this fictional world there is no metaphysically unified perspective granting the meaning of the events cohesion. The sequences after Bill’s death, far from polishing the film off with a sense of closure, suggests another new order of experience that will again challenge the capacity of human judgment: the experience of industrialized, global war, briefly evoked in the images of young soldiers going off to fight World War I at the end of Days of Heaven (images which gesture towards Malick’s World War II film, The Thin Red Line). Malick, in other words, poses the question of truth and judgment in relation to the events in Days of Heaven, but he does not answer it; and the possibility of historical events corresponding to a single version of the “truth,”
metaphysical or otherwise, remains a question which will be animated in both *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*.

A related motif, the relationship of characters with natural landscapes, is also in flux at film’s end. To some extent this break, present in all of Malick’s films, has been healed in *Days of Heaven*, given that this is the first film in Malick’s oeuvre to depict a close relationship between characters and the land in and against which they live. But, of course, the transience suggested by the film’s title is unavoidable here; by the end of the film, after Bill has died and after Abby has enrolled Linda in a girl’s school, we feel as if the days of heaven of the film’s title are truly over. This is especially true given that Linda is situated, by film’s end, in a disciplinary context similar to the one from which Kit and Holly abscond in *Badlands*. As if to suggest this meaning, the final images in *Days of Heaven* depict Linda and a friend escaping from the school to play on the railroad tracks. The presence of industry and civilization at the end of *Days of Heaven* suggest that humanity’s fraught relationship with the natural landscape remains an open motif in Malick’s work, and it constitutes a theme that, in the later films, is more elegiac than optimistic. These motifs, in addition to that of the voice and the uncertain journey, remain part of a “co-text” that we, as Malick’s viewers, have yet to finish, given their continued resonance in both *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*.

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2 Adrian Martin, “Things to Look Into: The Cinema of Terrence Malick.”


Quoted in Adrian Martin, “Things to Look Into: The Cinema of Terrence Malick.”

See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), 6-18.

Significant in this tradition is much film noir, in particular two important films by Fritz Lang in Hollywood: *The Woman in the Window* (1944) and *Scarlet Street* (1945).


Adrian Martin, “Things to Look Into: The Cinema of Terrence Malick.”


William Rothman and Marian Keane, *Reading Cavell’s The World Viewed*, 64.


33 Quoted in Daniel Yacavone, “Towards a Theory of Film Worlds,” 94.

34 Daniel Yacavone, “Towards a Theory of Film Worlds,” 98.

35 Daniel Yacavone, “Towards a Theory of Film Worlds,” 94.


39 D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 70.


41 Almendros discusses filming during the “magic hour,” the liminal space in-between sunset and nightfall, in Alemdros, *A Man with a Camera*, 182.


52 Gordon Gow, “Days of Heaven,” in Films and Filming 25, no. 9 (June 1979), 29.

53 Lloyd Michaels, Terrence Malick, 46.


55 Joan Mellen, “Spiraling Downward: America in Days of Heaven, In the Valley of Elah, and No Country for Old Men,” in Film Quarterly 61, no. 3 (Spring 2008), 28.
CHAPTER SIX: ON THE THIN RED LINE

The real war will never get into the books.

-Walt Whitman

Show me to see the world the way you do.

-An unnamed soldier, dazed by battle, in The Thin Red Line

Philosophy and The Thin Red Line

Few films have sparked the philosophical imagination so much as The Thin Red Line. Malick’s third film, the second adaptation of the James Jones novel of the same name, takes as its subject the experience of the C-for-Charlie Company in the Battle of Guadalcanal, a key conflict in the Pacific War between the Japanese and American armies in the Solomon Islands during World War II. The Thin Red Line was regarded as “philosophical” from its very first reviews, although for many befuddled critics the term often served as an epithet to explain away those aspects of its style not recognizable from conventional World War II films. While more sustained reflection has emerged in the ensuing decade, the film’s reception in academic circles has posed problems any critic attempting another reading must confront. The majority of academic interpretations, at least those with a philosophical bent, align The Thin Red Line with Martin Heidegger’s work, and in doing so suggest the film is, in its themes and representation of war, illustrative of his concept of Being (Dasein). As suitable as Heidegger’s concept is to a reading of the film, however, The Thin Red Line asks still more of us; as we will see, the film probes into the possible limits of Heidegger’s concept, as it is articulated in Being and Time, rather than merely illustrating it. Further, the film does this not abstractly, but
from within its own concrete situation within film history. In other words, as this study has emphasized elsewhere, the film, as a material, aesthetic object, pressures us to think through any concept which we bring to it from the history of philosophy in relation to the film’s own intervention in the history of cinematic genres and forms.

Heidegger’s concept evokes many of the terms of my own study. Dasein refers to a being-in-the-world aware of its own transience and able to give meaning and significance to its experiences in the finite amount of time it has within the world. Dasein is constituted existentially, through the capacity of choice and the creation of possibilities. Heidegger himself suggests:

Dasein has always some sort of decision as to the way in which it is in each case mine. That entity which in its Being has this very Being as an issue, comports itself towards its Being as its ownmost possibility. In each case Dasein is its possibility, and it ‘has’ this possibility, but not just as a property, as something present-to-hand would.²

Dasein is an achievement of human beings; deriving from the capacity for choice, it results when a human being stakes out significance in and through the temporal frame of embodied existence. As such, Dasein is not simply guaranteed but is rather the sought-after product of a constant human striving. For many critics, Heidegger’s focus on the self-aware, self-reflexive, existentially becoming individual has distinct parallels with *The Thin Red Line* because Malick, it is argued, animates Dasein in an environment where the self’s temporal existence becomes especially precarious: the battlefield. The film is, for these critics, not so much about the battle itself but about the various ways in
which the soldiers ascribe meaning to their lives when their own mortality becomes terrifyingly apparent. As Marc Furstenau and Leslie MacAvoy, who draw upon the concept of Dasein and its interior, self-reflexive search for meaning in their reading of the film, suggest, “Malick uses voice-overs to represent this inwardness in the film, and through the voice-overs we become privy to the characters’ thoughts in a manner which augments the dialogue and gives us a deeper understanding of how their situation challenges them, the questions it raises for them and how they attempt to make sense of it.”³ Kaja Silverman, in a similar reading, suggests that the film’s depiction of the soldier’s confrontation with his own finitude is most evocative of Heidegger’s philosophy: “[I]t is very different to choose the destiny we cannot escape by becoming in advance the individual that event will make us, as Heidegger urges us to do, than to be cast by an external force into the mouth of a death machine.”⁴ The Thin Red Line, in both of these interpretations, becomes a dramatization of the attempt of human beings, despite being thrown into the maw of this “death machine” that is war, to find meaning and significance in this experience – that is, to find an “Openness to the world,” as Silverman phrases it, which resists the instrumentalization of body and mind inherent in any battle plan which would posit the soldier as a cog in a design over which he has no control.⁵

While insightfully associating Dasein with The Thin Red Line’s narrative, these readings have not gone far enough in suggesting what Malick’s film, as a film – assembled not only through its dramatic content, but also as a work of cinema with a certain history – creatively accomplishes in dialogue with Heidegger. Furstenau and MacAvoy suggest in passing that “Malick has chosen the cinema for his poesis,” yet the
authors remain mostly concerned with the story he tells through that poesis rather than with the director’s own unique grappling with the enabling creative automatisms which constitute the cinema. For example, in the passage quoted in the preceding paragraph, the authors have characterized the film’s voice-overs as a reliable sign of character interiority, but have not thoroughly considered the film’s problematizing of the very notion of interiority and subjectivity as they are usually treated in narrative cinema. Their reading thus falls into the trap of conventionalizing what is in many respects an unconventional war film. Silverman, although more attentive to certain instances of style, can ultimately only suggest that the film “does philosophy, every bit as much as a text like Heidegger’s *On the Way to Language* might be said to do,” without suggesting what this “doing” might consist of, beyond her own reading of the film in association with Heidegger’s ideas. While at times brilliantly using Malick’s film to illuminate Heidegger’s ideas, these interpreters do not go far enough in suggesting how *The Thin Red Line*, as a material, aesthetic object with its own history, intervenes in our understanding of Dasein (or any other concept). Robert Sinnerbrink, I think, in his own article on Malick’s film, has correctly posed the solution to the problem: “Rather than citing Malick’s background in order to lend the film’s imagery and themes a Heideggerian content, the relationship between Heidegger and Malick should remain a question, rather than a presupposition, for philosophical readings of his work.” And for Sinnerbrink, such a question cannot be posed except through close attention to the film’s own “enactment of…cinematic poesis, revealing different ways in which we can relate to
our own mortality, the finitude of Being, the radiance of Nature, [and] the experience of loss, of violence, of humanity, and of just letting things be.”

Sinnerbrink’s own terms are, admittedly, rather abstract. However, the relationship between Heidegger’s concept of Dasein and the finitude, nature, and loss on display in *The Thin Red Line* may be more concretely established through a close analysis of the film itself (a task which Sinnerbrink himself does not undertake). If it is true that any question regarding the relationship between philosophical thinking and *The Thin Red Line* cannot be broached usefully without understanding the film’s own contribution to our thinking-through of the concepts we bring to it, our understanding of the film itself, in turn, cannot be had without placing it within its own historical lineage. That lineage, for the purposes of this chapter, is threefold. First, more than any other Malick film, *The Thin Red Line* arrives to us as another instance of a genre, in this case the World War II combat film, which begins with *Bataan!* (1943) and continues to the present day. Its own creativity can thus be partially understood in relation to the history of this genre. Second is the related question of the myths which *The Thin Red Line* animates in its depiction of war. As we will see, while many war films extol certain truths about the war as a whole, Malick’s film holds any confidence in the possibility of establishing a single “truth” about World War II in suspension. Instead, the film focuses, in a more fine-grained manner, on how particular soldiers bring different myths to bear upon their experience. Third is the question of Malick’s own film style, related, of course, to the two aforementioned aspects of genre and meaning. In making *The Thin Red Line*, the director
crafted a film which was distinct not only from the contemporary Hollywood cinema of
the late 1990s, but also a shift in aesthetic temperament relative to his two earlier films.

Malick is infrequently discussed in terms of genre; his obvious creativity and
originality often lead critics to assume a discussion of other genre films is less important
than a reading of Malick’s own work apart from this context. Yet *The Thin Red Line* may
nevertheless be placed in this lineage, for Malick’s creativity becomes visible, at least to
some extent, through his departure from traditional forms. The World War II genre has
received copious attention in academic film studies, and in the last twenty years many of
the debates have centered around the genre’s relationship to the Vietnam war. For Dana
Polan, representations of war in cinema prior to Vietnam, in which the World War II
combat film is central, are marked by a certain conservatism, a tendency to explore
variations upon “a set structure and set meaning,” depicting missions and battles that “For
the soldiers…can become the occasion for emotional growth and self-discovery but, in
the ideology of the World War II film, one discovers what was really there all along – the
meaningfulness of nation and national mission, the rightness of one’s place, the
justification of cause.” By contrast, in war films made since Vietnam, one or more of
these components of narrative and ideology are out-of-joint or entirely absent, resulting
in films such as *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *Full Metal Jacket*
(Stanley Kubrick, 1987), and *Casualties of War* (Brian De Palma, 1989). These films,
questioning the purpose and validity of Vietnam, throw the experiences of their
characters into a state of existential angst and uncertainty. In some respects, *The Thin Red
Line*, in chronologically following this post-Vietnam combat cycle, may be read as an
American World War II film made through the prism of Vietnam and other movies made about Vietnam, as Polan himself goes on to suggest with respect to the film’s structure: “Like the narration that can go anywhere but never adds up to a final meaning, the field of battle in The Thin Red Line is a space of floating, of meaningless violence that can come from anywhere, but also of the effect of just waiting, of living with nonaction.”\(^\text{10}\)

With these words we are not too far from the perception- and affection-images in Deleuze’s thinking on cinema, in this case functioning within the one genre that, at least after World War II and before Vietnam, was perhaps the most insistent on narrative momentum and ideological affirmation. Polan thus suggests that Malick’s film reminds us that for the individual soldier not every moment of the experience of war is affirmed by nationalistic patriotism. The phenomenon of ideological affirmation in war cinema, while a component of many World War II films, was in large part developed as a response to World War I during World War II, the first World War having been regarded, in some respects, as a troubling and unresolved conflict that, while perhaps not as traumatic as Vietnam, has certain parallels with the later war. Many of the most notable war films which followed “The Great War” in the 1920s and 1930s – including The Big Parade (1925) and All Quiet on the Western Front (1930) – may be fairly described as pacifist and antiwar, reflecting Thomas Doherty’s claim that the “carnage [of World War I was perceived as] so brutal and senseless, the outcome so shattering and disorienting, that it resisted celluloid rehabilitation. Hollywood never engineered the raw materials of the Great War – destruction, death, and disillusionment – into the scaffolding for durable generic construction – reconciliation, reassurance, affirmation.”\(^\text{11}\) It was only during
World War II that Hollywood (through a close relationship with the U.S. government) began to craft films – such as *Sergeant York* (1941) and *Air Force* (1943) – in which the war’s purpose was seen as entirely justified in nationalistic terms and the kinds of ideological closure Polan speaks of began to emerge. Even in the most inquisitive and probing post-war films, such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), the purpose of the war itself is not questioned (in the case of the Wyler film, only the ability of American society to deal with the post-war traumas of the individual soldier is put on the table for debate).

Yet Polan’s historical contrast between World War II and Vietnam films perhaps oversimplifies these earlier World War II films. Despite the narrative closure World War II films attempted to attain from their inception, a move necessitated by both governmental pressure and the more disturbing legacy of World War I on film, the phenomenon of the war film has frequently been met, on the spectator’s side of the experience, by a willingness to engage in debate and inquiry. Doherty goes so far as to suggest that the American film as a popular art form matured during the war years precisely because it became a privileged medium for the staging of a discourse regarding, if not the war itself, then at least representations of the war. As he writes,

> Not until Hollywood enlisted as an active agent in the Second World War did the ephemeral popular art dedicated to ‘mere entertainment’ suddenly and seriously matter – to the War Department, to the Office of War Information, to spectators made sensitive to the educational import and ideological impact of the movies . . .

The unique, unprecedented alliance between Washington and Hollywood
generated not only new kinds of movies but a new attitude toward them.

Hereafter, popular art and cultural meaning, mass communications and national politics, would be intimately aligned and commonly acknowledged in American culture.\textsuperscript{12}

As Doherty goes on to note, the link between cinematic representation and knowledge of World War II did not merely imply passive acceptance. “[T]he wartime generation was every bit as cognizant of the limitations of art as the present one, and quite a bit sharper-eyed to celluloid evasion and Hollywood convention.”\textsuperscript{13} Doherty, in examining trade magazines and other periodicals published during the period, goes on to point out that soldiers themselves contributed to the discourse circulating around the production of images of the war they were fighting, in many cases commenting upon those films which seemed most authentic.\textsuperscript{14} “Far from having a mesmerized gaze or a goosestepped soul,” Doherty goes on to suggest, “the average American moviegoer circa 1945 had acquired a more alert, attuned, and skeptical eye than the circa 1941 model. Graduating from the four-year curriculum in motion-picture technique and propagandistic persuasion was the first generation of moving-images spectators as accustomed to education as entertainment, as prepared for critical engagement as for cultural diversion.”\textsuperscript{15} From its inception, then, the World War II combat film – at least as experienced, if not always in terms of its production – has been founded on debate and inquiry, despite the frequent tendency of the films themselves to be structured around a chosen version of the “truth,” a justification of America’s involvement in the war.
Certain moments of early World War II combat films, in fact, anticipate the inquisitive, ambiguous nature of a more open-ended film such as *The Thin Red Line*. For example, the very first entry in the genre, *Bataan*, vividly emphasizes the oppressiveness of the experience of war. Kathryn Kane notes that in the film “freedom is not often suggested by editing. Each man seems to be pinned to his cramped environment by the steady gaze of the camera. Increasingly frequent ground fog and a stagnant, disease-carrying pond complete the oppressiveness.” Even if such moments are resolved by the film’s end, as they are in *Bataan*, they are at least included so as to demonstrate the experiential ambiguity which exists on the battlefield. *The Thin Red Line* builds upon such moments from the history of its genre by creatively incorporating these two central aspects from the genre’s early reception – war as a phenomenon to be questioned, and not passively accepted, and war as an experience unto itself, irreducible to the machinations of nationalistic ideology or mythmaking which may serve to justify the cause back home – within its very structure and texture. At once told through a linear narration that moves in parallel to the ineluctable forward movement of war in the manner of the Deleuzian movement-image (like all war films, Malick’s is about the undertaking of particular battles with goals in mind, and the resolution, no matter how temporary, of these conflicts), at the same time the film also emphasizes the thick, haptic experience of the characters, who exist more often than not in a liminal sensory environment which, as Polan accurately notes in the earlier quote, is often a “space of floating” and waiting. Recalling Garrett Stewart’s discussion of form and style in the third chapter of this study, then, the plot of *The Thin Red Line* thus guarantees some degree of traditional narrative
closure (particular characters pass away, and the depicted Battle of the Guadalcanal ends with the departure of one group of soldiers from the island) but its style, as more than a mere adjunct to the plot, bestows a present-tense thickness tethered to the experience of characters we never come to know as the conventional protagonists of classical cinema. It is not only the characters themselves who refrain from justifying the war through the patriotic, and sometimes jingoistic, discourse of the traditional World War II combat film; the film’s imagery itself, as we will see, never evokes a confidence in a patriotic purpose that justify the loss of life and shedding of blood. The war remains – both thematically and aesthetically – a phenomenon open to future debate in both the soldier’s experience and the viewer’s apprehension of the film, not something on which the film itself passes explicit judgment.

Rather than framing World War II through an already articulated “truth” provided by past instances of its genre, then, *The Thin Red Line* is in large part a dialogical “film about conversation and interchange,” as Polan has characterized it. Like *Days of Heaven* and its climactic depiction of the locust plague, *The Thin Red Line* gestures towards no single interpretation which might frame its depiction of a tumultuous event. As Michel Chion suggests, it is the best example of the director’s “interrogatory works, whose role is to make questions resonate in the universe, and speech in the world.” But unlike *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, this dialogue in and about the film is not framed through the retrospective narration of a single character. As will also be the case with his next film, *The New World*, several different characters constitute the voice-overs in *The Thin Red Line*, and their temporal frame – and even, at times, the identity of the voice
presently speaking – remains more difficult to establish. As Chion has also suggested, “the voices do not necessarily have any precise connection to the exact moment into which they are edited,” and they are further described by Gavin Smith as “fleeting glimpses into the characters’ souls or semi-coherent fragments of thought…presented in a variety of registers, from naturalistic to poetic.”

The Thin Red Line marks a shift within Malick’s oeuvre, then, wherein the film is pivoted not around the becoming and dynamism of one character’s subjectivity (and the personal history of the character as constructed through that frame), but rather about the concrete experience of war itself, as framed in the film through a multitude of subjectivities that frequently blend together. This leads us to a second historical lineage in which we can place the film, which concerns its use of myth. Amidst the film’s movement across a myriad of subjectivities, five characters in particular emerge as salient (although, typical to Malick’s form, they remain difficult to “read” in terms of the conventional psychology of the classical cinema). Each of them, in the absence of a metaphysical or ideological truth that might bind the journey of the soldiers, views the war through different kinds of myths which allow them to endure the experience and attribute to it a sense of meaning and significance. Private Witt (Jim Cavaziel), who for many critics is the closest the film comes to a conventional protagonist, speaks of a desire for “another world” and frequently goes AWOL from the army (at the beginning of the film he is seen absconding to the Melanesian islands). Witt, more than any other character, ruminates on the fact of mortality, and his attitude towards the events of the war bespeaks a calmness and serenity that is in counterpoint to the violence otherwise seen. His attitude lets us see the
Guadalcanal as a kind of fallen Eden, whose prelapsarian innocence Witt’s own finite acts of care and love might help to restore. Sergeant Bell (Ben Chaplin), meanwhile, espouses no grand philosophy, but instead uses the memory of his wife back home, Marty (Miranda Otto) as a means of enduring the war, a memory communicated to viewers through a series of flashbacks seen intermittently throughout the film. As a result, the viewer does not come to know Marty herself so much as the idealized woman Bell fashions through his own subjectivity in order to endure the battle. Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte), meanwhile, seizes upon World War II as a last chance to achieve glory in what has been a long and frustrating military career, likening himself to Caesar and framing the war through the Homeric epics that give his vision of the battle the grandeur it necessitates. Captain Staros (Elias Koteas), Tall’s doppelganger, is quiet, contemplative, and religious (while Jewish in the novel, in the film he appears to be Christian). Although a lawyer back home, Staros, more than any other character in the film, is shown to search for the ethical law which might serve him in guiding his men well; unlike Witt, Tall, and, to a lesser extent, Bell, Staros does not frame his experience of the war under a single truth, but rather insists upon his continual search for that meaning within experience. (In this is he is perhaps closest to Heidegger’s Dasein than any other character in the film). Sergeant Welsh (Sean Penn), by contrast, disavows any possible transcendence of earthly existence and the absence of any other world besides the one in which each individual exists isolated and alone; he throws the meaning-bestowing existential frameworks of other characters into relief given his repeated insistence on the lack of meaning in the world. However, at certain points the meanings these characters use to endure the war
come under duress (and, in the case of Bell, outright collapse), necessitating that each soldier must at some point reframe, or entirely rebuild, the truth he has assigned to his experience.

There is, of course, much more to say of these characters and these meanings. For now, this brief summary leads us to the fact that Malick’s film, rather than asserting a single truth about World War II, as a more conventional combat film might, *depicts* the search for meaning, for explanatory myths. Thus, while Colin MacCabe, in an early review of the film, chides Malick for having “no [historical] interest in World War II” because “C for Charlie company are engaged in a conflict which is as old as time, which is simply a modern version of the Trojan War,” the director’s interest in myth, we might say in contrast to MacCabe, does not in fact preclude history. Indeed, Malick shows how experiences of the most tumultuous historical events throw characters out-of-joint and in desperate search of new explanatory myths through which to understand experience. Thus, for Malick, myths do not frame history, but rather operate *in* history. Admittedly, *The Thin Red Line* is to some extent interested in those aspects of the phenomenon of warfare, such as the individual’s confrontation with mortality, that, to some extent, transcend historical context and occur in every modern war. But while MacCabe suggests that Malick’s film is a retreat into ahistorical myth, it is more accurate to suggest the film is *about* the myths individuals use to negotiate the experience of war, rather than functioning as a myth itself.

To this end, it is useful to remember how myth in fact functions in philosophy. Aleksei Fyodorovich Losev, whose study of myth has explored commonalities between
the mythic and the poetic as well as the differences between them, has characterized myth by distinguishing it with the aesthetic. For Losev, art produces distance: we may be enraptured with the objects on a stage or screen but we do not “rush the stage” or throw ourselves at the screen as we might following a fascination with an object in reality. A mythical engagement, on the other hand, is real; the mythical subjectivity, as Losev notes, “does rush the stage” [italics Losev’s].

“The important thing,” Losev goes on, “is that art and poetry have a certain detachment that snatches things away from the flux of everyday phenomena and turns them into objects of a peculiar interest, remote from basic and everyday interests” [italics Losev’s]. But when art loses this distance which defines the aesthetic, and becomes myth, the subject believes in the art as he would reality, and apprehends the myth as a viable frame for understanding the world (indeed, the myth becomes part of the world).

Such an idea is vividly evoked in *The Thin Red Line* shortly after Colonel Tall quotes Homer, in Greek, to Captain Staros, prior to a battle. “Eos rotodoctoles,” Tall intones, translating, “Rosy-fingered dawn. You’re Greek, aren’t you Captain? Did you ever read Homer? We read Homer at the Point. In Greek.” Tall affirms a close relationship to Homer’s myth not only through his association of the “rosy-fingered dawn” with the sunrise depicted within Malick’s exquisite framing of the Solomon Islands, but also through the fact that he has read the myth in the original, which, for Tall at any rate, puts him closer to the heroic meaning of the myth than any other character. But while Tall is quick to envision his own quest for glory as a real-world parallel to *The Odyssey*, it is clear that Malick himself does not support this view. Leo Bersani and
Ulysse Dutoit, for example, have pointed out that the film is “more about the psychic uses of war than about the origins or causes of war,” and the film achieves some distance from the various ways in which each of the soldiers appropriate the war as a carrier of a particular meaning, a personal myth (or a historical myth which has become personal, in Tall’s case) that allows them to endure and make meaning of what is a disorienting experience.23

Irving Singer, exploring a similar idea, suggests that cinema, and the moving image more generally, is uniquely capable to animate not only myths themselves, but the various ways in which human beings use myths as frames for experience:

As we all know, many examples of superb mythmaking occur in operas between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. Film goes further: it transfers the mythological representation out of the theater and into the realm of nature and society, where it still takes place aesthetically but can now be observed as if it duplicated what we might encounter in our commonplace immersion in the everyday world of sight and sound.24

In one respect, there are cinematic myths such as John Ford’s Red River (1948), films which ask their viewers to “rush the stage” of aesthetic distance and accept the film’s vision of the world (in the case of Ford the history of the American west) as a truth. Many World War II films also function in this manner. Malick’s work, however, is closer to Orson Welles, a director who claimed that, rather than using cinema to make myths, he used the aesthetics of film to examine them. (Of Ford’s work, only The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence achieves this kind of self-reflexive distance, although it is a distance used
ultimately to justify the validity of mythmaking). Seen through the lens of both Leskov’s and Singer’s ideas regarding myth, we might say that through the distance engendered by *The Thin Red Line* as an aesthetic object, we can see characters like Tall, in his projection of Homeric mythology, as an individual who rushes the stage and takes the myths through which he frames his experience as a natural extension of reality. Tall’s is only the most explicit of these myths; as we will see, others, such as Witt’s projection of innocence onto the Melanesian people, through which he can understand World War II as the “fall” of humanity from a kind of Eden, and Bell’s fantasy-idealization of his wife back home are equally mythic, even if they do not always draw on historically recognizable myths such as Homer’s Odyssey. By film’s end, several of these characters will encounter the collapse of one or more of these myths, and the film itself will refuse to settle on a single one of them as a universal truth of the experience of World War II.

If the genre of the combat film and the use of myth are two important aspects of the film’s place in history, Malick’s film style, and its departure from convention, marks a third. More than twenty years separate *Days of Heaven* and *The Thin Red Line*, an absence from filmmaking that is almost always remarked upon in literature on Malick.25 Much had changed in the intervening years, including the style of contemporary Hollywood filmmaking itself. If the 1970s had marked a moment of brief experimentation with narrative form and style, the gradual emergence of “blockbusters” such as *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) had ushered in more than two decades of so-called “high concept” filmmaking, resulting in films characterized less by enduring stories or stylistic forms than iconic imagery through which the film is easily marketed
(for example, the shark on the poster of *Jaws*, likely as memorable to its viewers as any narrative event within the film itself). Steven Spielberg has famously defined high-concepts as movie ideas “that you can hold in your hand,” and the difficulties Fox had in marketing *The Thin Red Line* suggested the film’s ideas were perhaps too unwieldy for such an efficient advertising campaign.

Creative work, of course, still continues to occur in Hollywood, motivated less by a departure from classical norms (as was New Hollywood) than from a desire to explore classical conventions in new ways. David Bordwell, for one, has drawn a parallel between contemporary Hollywood cinema and Italian mannerism: “In both situations, artists were acutely aware that they were expected to innovate, but they worked in the shadow of towering predecessors. How to paint the human body after Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo? How to tell a story authoritatively after Ford, Hawks, Hitchcock, and Welles?”

It is important to note that by 1998 (in part due to the influence of his first two films, and in part due to the legendary stature he had accrued during his absence from filmmaking) Malick himself had become one of these “towering predecessors.” The independent filmmaker David Gordon Green, for example, honed a style in his first two films, *George Washington* and *All the Real Girls*, which was repeatedly compared with Malick’s early work (and as if to acknowledge the influence, Malick produced Green’s third film, *Undertow*). Malick himself, as Lloyd Michaels points out, was given an enormous amount of freedom in crafting *The Thin Red Line*: Fox 2000 Pictures, the distributor of the film, insisted only that a certain number of recognizable star performers be cast.
Malick was largely successful in subverting the production company’s desire for recognizable actors, however, since many notable celebrities (George Clooney, Woody Harrelson, and John Travolta, for example) appear only fleetingly, and in roles that tend to undermine, or at least obscure, their star personas. In terms of form and style, Malick was less interested in paying tribute to the classical cinematic style as were many of his contemporaries in the 1990s, than he was in returning to the aesthetic temperament of silent films. Jonathan Rosenbaum, for example, noted that with *The Thin Red Line* Malick began explore “silent-movie syntax,” writing that “Malick’s most visible influence is F.W. Murnau’s *Tabu* (1930), a late silent picture that deals not with war but with ‘natural’ innocence and ‘civilized’ corruption in the South Seas.” Murnau’s influence in particular may be seen in Malick’s consistent reliance on lengthy and complex tracking shots; the moving camera is also staple of Murnau’s *The Last Laugh* (1925) and *Sunrise* (1927). As James Morrison has pointed out in writing on *The Thin Red Line*, “The primary formal maneuver…is a sinuous, decentered tracking shot that glides over multiple planes of action, following one character and then shifting to others with just the smallest turns of its roving but precisely defined perspective…even as it shows how each of the men is alone in his fear, it constantly reveals unexpected connections between them in space.” In addition to drawing unspoken connections between characters, the camera also serves to explore the way in which the landscape of the Guadalcanal exceeds the ability of any one character to understand it. As in *Sunrise*, in which Murnau frequently uses tracking shots that first follow and then, through an autonomous movement, move ahead of characters in space, Malick will situate a
character within a given space and then show how that space exceeds the single
caracter’s situation, shifting either to other characters or other aspects of the landscape
(such as the flora and fauna which surround the soldiers in the Solomon Islands). If
Malick’s narrative form and use of the voice-over constantly shifts to and from different
characters, his visual style and frequently discontinuous editing strategies complement
this array of perspectives; the camera, even more than in his first two films, might be
fairly characterized in Malick’s late work as exploratory, developing an interest in
character but equally, and at times more, eager to explore space and cut across time in
ways that are not always directly tethered to an interest in the characters the film
otherwise works to establish.

In some respects, Badlands and Days of Heaven are situated around the notion
that a film must have a single protagonist, given how closely the film follows the
experiences of Holly and Linda. These two films established an interest in these
particular characters, at least in part, through references to cinematic spectatorship:
Holly’s stereopticon in Badlands and Linda’s viewing of Chaplin’s The Immigrant in
Days of Heaven both parallel our own situation of film viewing, and draw us further into
the characters’ attempts to make meaning of their experience. No similar self-reflexive
parallel emerges as directly in The Thin Red Line, and no single character orients our
experience of what is a frequently disorienting film. But one character does provide a
subtle metaphor for cinematic spectatorship that begins to suggest how Malick’s film
style intersects with the film’s thematic concerns (and also the philosophical concept of
Dasein itself). Near the film’s end, a new Captain, Bosche (George Clooney) speaks at
some length about the principles through which he will guide the men. Welsh, only have listening, tells us the following in voice-over:

   Everything a lie. Everything you hear, everything you see. So much to spew out.
   They just keep coming. One after another. You’re in a box. A moving box. They want you dead or in their lie. Only one thing a man can do. Find something that’s his. Make an island for himself.

In one sense, Welsh’s voice-over is of a part with the rest of what we see of his nihilistic character. Refusing to find meaning in the authority Bosche and the other patriarchal figures in the army exude, Welsh in fact is shown to resist their authority. For Welsh, this resistance to war results not in new meaning but only a lack of signification, suggested by another moment in the film involving Welsh: after a heroic deed on the field of battle, Staros insists that he will see that Welsh receive a Purple Heart, which Welsh point-blankly refuses, pointing again, in his characteristic manner, to what he views as the pointless materialism behind the purpose of the war: “Property. The whole fuckin’ thing’s about property.” If the circularity of the film’s narrative structure to some extent complements Welsh’s suggestion that the war is to a large extent an experience of predetermined repetition – one of the film’s final images insists on the repetition inherent in the linear grind of battle, for example, showing us another ship full of young soldiers heading to another battle on the Solomon Islands as the C-for-Charlie company sails to another mission – this oppressive repetition, for Malick, is not necessarily meaningless, for it can be meaningfully resisted through a different kind of aesthetic circularity. As Bersani and Dutoit have remarked, “the push ahead – the ideal narrative pushing toward a
clearly defined goal – is opposed to the film’s favored circular mobility…itself a kind of kinetic argument against the invasive movements of war. It is non-purposive, devoid of the territorial ambitions necessarily inherent in military planning.\textsuperscript{32}

The only solution Welsh sees to the army’s instrumentalization of the human being as a means to secure property, however, is to withdraw from any possibility of community with others. On another level, of course, Welsh’s metaphor of the “moving box” evokes the mobility of the rectangular frame comprising the film we are presently watching, yet the fact that the film contains no single protagonist insures we need not view Malick’s moving box through only Welsh’s pessimistic perspective. While the character’s nihilism leads him to conceive of this frame as an “island” every man builds for himself, Michel Chion has pointed out that his metaphor’s resonance with the cinema itself is more optimistically open-ended:

Cinema is the art that makes it possible to place the large and small things of this world on the same scale, making them figure at the same size in the changeless frame of the screen. In Terrence Malick’s cinema, the animal living its animal life, the landscape and the sun, human beings, their questions, their preoccupations and their machines are all placed on the same scale. The film uses its own means . . . to illuminate the strange cohabitation of human beings with animals and with the world, in the same ‘moving box.’\textsuperscript{33}

If Welsh places himself on an island, in viewing \textit{The Thin Red Line} we, by contrast, are brought out of ourselves, perceiving the landscape of the Gudalcanal and the experience of battle through a multitude of subjectivities. If the forward movement of the battle
determines the nature of the soldiers’ precarious existence, Malick’s visually
overflowing, frequently sinuous “moving box” contains the excess that no battle plan can
master. Malick’s style suggests not necessarily another world beyond this one, but rather
other possible worlds within this one, ones not articulated in terms of nationalistic
ideology or patriotism.

This part of the chapter has sought to outline the ways in which *The Thin Red
Line* is located within history through its difference in terms of content as well as the
variations it performs upon stylistic conventions. This location is informed by Malick’s
intervention in the war genre, his characters’ use of myth, and the crafting of a film style
that resists not only certain trends in contemporary filmmaking but also the linear thrust
of war itself. In the next two sections, I will be concerned with closely examining
particular scenes, sequences, and instances of theme and style across the duration of the
film, not only in order to deepen the ideas which I have introduced so far, but also to
more concretely demonstrate the way in which the film itself, as a concrete, historically
situated instance of cinematic poesis, asks us to engage with Heidegger’s concept of
Dasein, as well as other philosophical concepts that resonate within the film. In the next
section, I will be primarily concerned with a closer look into Malick’s voice-overs, here
serving as our primary point of entry into the film’s mode of questioning and
interrogation, providing us with the opportunity to develop possible relationships
between the film’s mode of inquiry and Heidegger’s thinking. I will suggest that unlike
most World War II films that settle on an ideological framework for depicting the war,
*The Thin Red Line*’s use of the voice suggests that the truth about the experience of war is
ultimately not representable under the sign of a single truth. While the voices in Malick’s film yearn for connection and affirmation, the film repeatedly insists on the loneliness and isolation of the soldiers and the ways their efforts to craft meaning are ultimately bound up in their own selves. In the final section, I will build upon this idea by examining more closely the enabling myths which particular characters use to frame their experience of war. The film develops a series of aesthetic patterns which connect, in non-discursive terms, the explanatory frameworks characters use to understand the war, but ultimately does not settle on any one of them, deferring the question of how World War II is to be understood as one which is open to further contestation and dialogue. In this, Malick’s film will be shown to be a highly unique World War II combat film, given that it never settles on any single truth or ideology about the war.

**Asking Questions**

Far from assuming confidence in its genre’s (or any historical form’s) ability to accurately or truthfully depict an experience of World War II, *The Thin Red Line* poses the possibility of cinema capturing any truth about war as an open question. When Colin MacCabe suggests that “the film invites us to take [its voice-overs’] statements as defining the images we are seeing,” he is missing the extent to which Malick’s film throws a question mark around the phenomena it presents to us, reflexively calling our attention to the fact that this is not simply a film about war using images to advance a linear story, but a film interrogating the potential value of these particular images for an understanding of the experience of war it depicts. This reflexive questioning is
consistent with the film’s engagement with Heidegger’s concept of Dasein, for Dasein cannot be understood apart from the notion of a human being questioning itself and its existence in the world. But as we will see, applying Heidegger’s concept to *The Thin Red Line* eventually leads us to the idea that Malick’s film also poses questions to the concept of Dasein itself. These inquiries are not merely grafted onto a depiction of the war, but rather emerge from an experience of war, given that figures such as Witt, Welsh, and others are posing many of the film’s questions.

A close look at the first images in the film, and the voices accompanying them, can help us deduce more carefully the film’s method of self-reflexive questioning and its relationship to Heidegger’s concept of Dasein. After a brief title sequence, we see images that establish a recurring pattern and begin to suggest the film’s attitude towards the natural landscape against which the soldiers conduct the war. In the first of these, an alligator descends into the water. The camera, tilted at a slight high angle, moves closer to the alligator, at first tracking the forward movement of its descent, and then lingering for a few seconds, after it is submerged under the water, on the layer of moss floating on top of the water and the remaining ripples and swirls on the water’s surface. This opening shot’s emphasis on downward movement is inverted in the next two images, the first of the trunk of a tree and shafts of light shining on the ground in front of it (the mise-en-scène guides our eye upward through the light which reminds us of the sky above, out of frame), while the second is aimed upwards at the sky’s light cutting through the tree’s leaves. These three shots outline a pattern – both formal and thematic – which will recur throughout the film: At times *The Thin Red Line* will keep us firmly on the ground, near
the depths towards which the alligator in the opening image submerges itself, concerned with the material, embodied experience of its soldiers (and certain of the soldiers will express a worldview that would keep us firmly on the ground, too, for some come to express that war makes them feel like nothing more than material, or “just dirt,” as one unnamed character terms it). Further, apart from a brief glance at a military map of the Guadalcanal wielded by a general early in the narrative, the film gives us no cartographic mastery of the land these soldiers traverse; most of the time we know only as much as they do. Yet at other times – in a way that the second and third shots discussed above indicate – both the film and certain characters within it express a yearning for something above and beyond this earthly realm, but which might nevertheless help explain their immediate experience of war.

If these images, then, inaugurate a major pattern in the film’s style, a to-and-fro movement between land and sky, it is also worth noting that my very interpretation of these images of nature also introduces an equally important motif that is echoed throughout the film, that is, the motif of interpretation itself. In the third shot discussed above, the camera’s gaze towards the sky is coupled by a voice-over. Many critics, in their search for a central protagonist that would make the film seem more conventional than it really is, mistakenly attribute this voice to the character of Witt, who will be introduced to the film shortly after this sequence, but it is actually the voice of a soldier named Train, played by John Dee Smith, who does not appear on the film’s visual track for another fifteen minutes and whom we will never know very well. “What’s this war at the heart of nature?” Train asks on the soundtrack. “Why does nature vie with itself? The
land contend with the sea?” In rhyme with this voice – which poses at once both a question and an implicit interpretation of nature’s significance (the voice apparently believes in a war in nature) – Malick presents us with a fourth shot, again of a tree, with a vine wrapped tightly around it, filmed by the camera in a high-angle shot that tilts further upward. It would appear as if Train’s implicit interpretation of nature is affirmed on the film’s visual track with this image of vine and tree in conflict, in war. Yet it is better to say, in fact, that what the film is affirming is only the validity of his question: Yes, war – or something we would like to name war – would appear to emerge from nature, as we see in this image of a vine choking a tree. Yet is it nature naming war, or us? It appears, Malick’s first shots seem to be telling us, that Train’s is a question worth asking; at the very least, nothing in what he says is necessarily refuted in the images we see. The images, while affirming the validity of the question, do nothing to provide closure to it through an answer. A distance exists between our language and the space of nature, for as the film’s next three hours will repeatedly remind us, Train’s question, and the assumptions contained within it, can only be asked of nature; nature, standing autonomous from us, never answers.

In a way, this point is obvious enough, but it provides a clue into the function of many of the voice-overs in *The Thin Red Line*, leading us to a consideration of the shape of the film as a whole. Bersani and Dutoit have recognized the relation of the film’s voice-overs to its presentation of nature (and indeed to all the phenomena into which the voices inquire), writing that “the film’s response [to the questions posed through the voice-overs] will be non-discursive. Language raises questions which, Malick’s film
suggests, language may be inherently unable to answer.” It would appear that the characters themselves understand this. Much later in the film, Train’s voice appears again on the soundtrack. This time he does not read nature as a parallel to war; instead, he affirms that such a reading is a subjective projection, and that nature indeed stands autonomous from any individual’s attempt to ascribe meaning to it. “One man looks at a dying bird and sees nothing but unanswered pain,” Train’s voice tells us. “Another man sees that same bird and feels the glory – feels something smiling through it.” Train’s voice-over here reminds us that nature is never burdened with already articulated symbolic meaning, and can never reach a point where nature’s mystery is foreclosed by the human experience. It is, rather, always open to multiple readings, or our own expressions of a world, to recall the terms of the previous chapter. And like nature itself, the film’s imagery can never respond to us, or the characters, discursively.

Given that the film does not answer these questions, one inroads to making meaning through *The Thin Red Line* is to entertain the idea that our concern should not necessarily, or primarily, be with the questions themselves, but rather with the human subjects whose voices ask these questions and make these statements. Who are these individuals? Do the voices represent each individual’s subjectivity? By extension, do they represent an experience of war that is collective – that extends beyond the individual voice we hear, isolated on the soundtrack through voice-overs that appear, at times, more monological than dialogical? Asking these questions leads us to contemplate further the film’s form as a whole, and, in turn, its own attitude towards the possibility of the experience of war finding representation in a historical narrative.
To pursue this inquiry, we can explore further this example of Train, who speaks both of the voice-overs discussed so far. He is only a minor character in the film (yet no less significant for this, given how frequently Malick shifts among perspectives). He appears, apart from the voice-overs, only twice, and in scenes that are very similar. It should be noted immediately that in these appearances – in speaking with other characters in the film – Train speaks in a far different register than he does in the voice-overs. Early in the film, before Charlie Company arrives at Guadalcanal, Train trembles in fear in the face of the impending battle he knows he must face, and talks with Welsh about both his past and his future. Train’s stepfather, we learn, beat him as a child; he spent a good number of childhood nights sleeping in a chicken coop to avoid his wrath. He expected things to get better, but instead, he is about to face the most harrowing experience of his life. Here Malick sketches an entire socioeconomic and psychological background in brief dialogue, yet the isolation Train expresses here (both in his account of his biography and in his fear of the impending battle), and his feeling that his future hangs in the balance of this war, characterizes each soldier to some degree. (Welsh’s face betrays that he has heard this kind of story before from young recruits). Train appears only once more in the film, near the end, as Charlie Company boards a ship to leave Guadalcanal, speaking with an unnamed companion. His fear, still palpable as Charlie Company heads to their next battle, is more contained now; he speaks again of his difficult life, made only more harrowing through his experience of war.

Apart from the fact that Train is wearier now than he was before, little has changed in this second scene, and nothing in what he says suggests this is the same
individual responsible for the poetic, philosophical musings on the film’s soundtrack; as if to accentuate this, Malick cues another Train voice-over (the final words presented in the film) immediately after the character has appeared to us in his final scene:

Where is it that we were together? Who were you that I lived with? Walked with? A brother. A friend…Darkness, light. Strife and love. Are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face? Oh my soul, let me be in you now.

Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining.

Beyond their actual content, this voice-over, like many others in the film, succeeds in establishing a gulf between a diegetic character and that same character’s voice-over on the soundtrack. Unlike Witt and Welsh, who, as we will later explore, have discussions that may be fairly characterized as philosophical at certain moments in the film, nothing of what we see or hear of Train in the diegesis suggests he is capable of pursuing the kinds of questions towards which his voice-over gestures. If anything, Malick’s sketch of the character’s sociological and psychological background suggests the opposite. It is possible, then, that Train’s voice-over – and nearly all of the other voice-overs in the film, with the aforementioned exceptions of Witt and Welsh – are not part of a social discourse at all. Unlike Linda in *Days of Heaven*, whose narration is informed by the folk stories she has heard, the voices of these soldiers seem to exist in an interior space so private that it cannot be reconciled with what we see of these individuals on the film’s visual track, even when the voices express a desire to achieve some kind of contact with their fellow soldiers.
Malick thus holds forth the relationship between a character’s visual appearance and that same character’s voice-over as an open dialectic, given that what we hear in a voice-over does not always resonate with what we see of the characters on the image track. The voice-overs are thus not subject to what Michel Chion calls deacousmatization – the loss of the disembodied voice’s omniscience – for the voices never possess such a power in the first place. Far from powerful, these private voices are only tenuously connected with what we see; there is the recurring feeling throughout *The Thin Red Line* that what the soldiers say in voice-over is not meant for public discourse. This idea also implies something about what happens to the individual soldier’s experience of war in any historical reconstruction (whether fictional or historiographical). John Streams, in an article on the film, has suggested that *The Thin Red Line* counters the notion of World War II as “the good war,” an idea saliently present in the discursive context against which the film was released in 1998, discourse generated in large part by Tom Brokaw’s book *The Greatest Generation* (which considers the collective experience of the war, as interpreted by Brokaw) and Steven Spielberg’s film *Saving Private Ryan* (which affirms the individual heroism of particular soldiers in the war). As Streamas suggests, these representations of World War II are ultimately “euphemisms and visual sleights,” for the “‘real war’ got into neither books nor visual imagery.” Streamas acknowledges that such artifacts serve a purpose, for while many Americans at home understand the constructed nature of information and imagery delivered to them about war, each nonetheless fills a need as a “moral reference point.” But while *Saving Private Ryan*, for example, ultimately justifies the mission its central characters undertake through
notions of brotherhood amongst soldiers and defense of country, \textit{The Thin Red Line} eschews the establishment of such a moral compass almost entirely.

The director’s own source material, the Jones novel, espouses an even stronger response to such attempts (whether through print or Hollywood film) to control the understanding of what World War II means, and rejects any consideration of them as a reference point, moral or otherwise. This idea is suggested through the inner dialogue of one of Jones’ characters:

If this were a movie, this would be the end of the show and something would be decided. In a movie or a novel they would dramatise and build to the climax of the attack. When the attack came in the film or novel, it would be satisfying, it would decide something. It would have a semblance of meaning and a semblance of an emotion. And immediately after, it would be over. The audience could go home and think about the semblance of the meaning and feel the semblance of the emotion. Even if the hero got killed, it would still make sense. Art, Bell decided, creative art – was shit.\textsuperscript{38}

After reading this passage, we might suspect that the poetic voice-overs in Malick’s film (which have no precedent in the novel) might not impress the tough-minded Bell. But in another way \textit{The Thin Red Line} aligns itself with this character’s sentiments. Unlike other more widely seen or read accounts of the war, Malick’s version of \textit{The Thin Red Line} does not convey a confidence in the ability of either historiography or fiction to achieve the construction of a truth about the war. Like his previous films, it suggests that our knowledge of this moment of history will only be had via some concrete understanding of
the embodied experience of the figures in the film. The voice-overs themselves prompt
the viewer to realize that an honest historical reconstruction of this war, and perhaps any
war, cannot be had except through an accompanying recognition that any such attempt is
always inevitably incomplete. That a character who we barely know asks in the final five
minutes of the film “Where is it that we were together?” suggests the way The Thin Red
Line considers the meaning of World War II as open to ongoing contestation, rather than
something the film itself can anchor through narrative closure or moral certainty. The
film’s voice-overs, as James Morrison has suggested, “are the shards of lost, fleeting
voices,” (can an experience of war, the film seems to be asking, be about anything other
than loss?), at first scattered throughout Malick’s film and then patterned so as not to
ultimately reveal a single overarching historical truth about war, but to capture the
experiences of these fictional soldiers through a form and style that acknowledges
through its very construction that these fundamentally private encounters with mortality
can never ultimately find complete representation.39

The Thin Red Line, in eschewing a representation of World War II that attempts to
inscribe a single truth about its soldiers and the battle they fight, achieves its aesthetic
unity in a more paradoxical manner, by insisting upon the degree to which the characters
themselves are frequently isolated, rather than unified, in their experience of the war.
Moments of loneliness are frequent throughout Malick’s cinema; we might remember
Holly’s isolation in the very first shot of Badlands, in which she is depicted alone in her
bedroom with her dog, or Linda’s separation from the adult world of work in Days of
Heaven. To some extent, these characters are able to emerge out of their private selves
through their retrospective voice-overs, which attain some measure of engagement with
the world. The voice-overs in *The Thin Red Line* rarely exude any degree of authority or
retrospection. If Malick, like Jones, doubts the truth of conventional historical accounts
of war, it is also true that he also doubts the value of privileging the perspective of single
protagonist and a single subjectivity. In order to tell the story of these individual
experiences, in other words, Malick cannot rely wholly upon the account of any one of
them. Instead, the film endeavors to poetically connect several of them, generating a
composite picture of the experience, but one which carries with it a sense of melancholy
regarding the ultimate impossibility of such a composite to reach anything like a
finalized, historical (or metaphysical) truth.

But surely Malick did not make *The Thin Red Line* only to testify to the
impossibility of representing war in cinema, that is, to negate its own undertaking in
advance. What, then, is the nature of the truth that *The Thin Red Line* would like to
construct? In other words, does the notion that the experience of war cannot be
represented by the conventional means of cinema contain, in itself, a kind of truth that is
nevertheless relevant to that experience?

The battlefield in *The Thin Red Line* poses a special problem for the ability of a
human agent to existentially realize his or her intentional projects, for in battle the human
agent becomes part of a larger design (and few of these agents have in fact had any hand
in crafting that design). Nevertheless, the soldier in wartime faces, quite consciously, an
aspect of Dasein that is only rarely reflected upon in quotidian existence: the fact of one’s
own finitude. For Heidegger, to face the fact of one’s mortality is, as Kaja Silverman puts
it in her work on the film, “to be ‘held out’ into the ‘nothing’ – into the void of that nonbeing out of which we have emerged and to which we will return.” To be aware of one’s mortality and becoming-towards-death is, for Heidegger, part of what it means to be authentically human. When a soldier in The Thin Red Line begins to think about the nature of existence itself – when he attempts to ascribe meaning to his being-towards-death, which characterizes not only his own existence but also the existence of others – he confronts his own historical being more acutely and immediately than most humans. If some commentators have accused Malick’s voice-overs in this film of being only naïvely philosophical, perhaps the voices cannot help but be so, given that they are forming the beginnings of a philosophical inquiry which arises in response to a sudden recognition of one’s possibly impending mortality in war. The becoming of individual soldiers, then, is in large part an effort to make meaning of one’s existence in the face of death; theirs is thus a becoming (or, to choose a perhaps more suitable word for this film, a clearing, given that Malick’s visual compositions in The Thin Red Line frequently feature shafts of light forming paths through dense thickets of trees and landscapes) that is enabled by one’s sudden and immediate awareness of the entropic nature of existence. As Silverman goes on to suggest, “[T]he ‘nothing’ hits a front-line soldier in the face with every step he takes. More crucially, though, it is because it is almost impossible for those engaged in mortal combat to disintricate their mortality from the corpses strewn around them, and so to experience it outside the coordinates of loss.”

As the individual soldier grapples with his own mortality, then, he by virtue of this confrontation with finitude comes to recognize that each of his fellow soldiers
confronts their own being-towards-death at the same time. It is the very collective nature of this encounter – the fact that similar encounters with death surround each soldier – that intensifies each of their individual experiences. But as my discussion of the voice-overs has already suggested, this confrontation with mortality, and the shared nature of this confrontation, is not brought to the level of social discourse by Malick’s characters, even when they know that it colors the experience of everyone around them. Sequences in which characters do attempt to publicly discuss their personal encounter with death result only in frustration and a retreat into the private self. In one sequence, Private Doll (Dash Mihok) kills a Japanese soldier in battle. As we soon learn from his voice-over, it is the first human being he has killed in war: “I killed a man. Worst thing you can do. Worse than rape. I killed a man. Nobody can touch me for it.” Doll’s thoughts suggest that no law can punish him for this crime; in fact, it is a crime made lawful in war itself. At the same time, Doll’s attempt to ascribe a larger significance to this killing within the totality of the war itself fails. After he realizes he has killed the Japanese soldier, Doll shouts to a commanding officer that he believes the Japanese are retreating (he infers this, apparently, only because he has succeeded in killing one of them). It is a claim unsupported by the film’s visual track (which remains fixed on Doll in a medium close-up and shows us no image of the Japanese, retreating or otherwise); in fact, Doll has no evidence for his assertion apart from the fleeting triumph he feels in vanquishing another soldier. Doll is only told by the officer that he should be quiet and remain where he is. Here, the death of another, rather than allowing the soldier to attain some measure of understanding that resonates within the army as a collective, sends the soldier even
further into the recesses of his own subjectivity. Doll’s first experience with death is affirmed not within the army’s social structure (the very structure that makes killing lawful, and that would claim to make the death of another significant); instead, it only sends him into interior contemplation, as Malick’s inclusion of the voice-over in the sequence would suggest.

Heidegger’s philosophy, too, supports the notion that death – in particular, one’s own death – is not something about which one can converse with another, for as Stephen Mulhall points out, he conceives of Dasein’s being-toward-death as fundamentally non-relational, for Dasein, “death is a way to be; it is not an event but an existentiell possibility, a possible mode of its Being.” In Heidegger’s thinking, one who attempts to turn his own death, or the death of others, into a social event are seriously deluded, for death cannot be overcome by the planning of funerals or subscription to diet and exercise regimes which attempt to ward it off for awhile longer. “Those who adopt such strategies,” Mulhall goes on to observe, “refuse to acknowledge that death is not to be outstripped…[they] are covering over the fact that death is a non-relational possibility, not a social event.”

In a way, Malick’s film would seem to accede with these ideas, for discourse between characters in The Thin Red Line quite often fails to dialogically acknowledge the significance of death on the level of social meaning. The aforementioned sequence with Doll provides one instance of this idea; early in the film we find another example. Witt discusses, with another soldier, the death of his mother: “I couldn’t find nothin’ beautiful or uplifting about her going back to God. I heard of people talk about immortality, but I
ain’t seen it.” The flashback which is paired with this dialogue makes clear that it is not an objective depiction of the past but rather a subjective memory of Witt’s that may have no correspondence with reality in some of its details. It begins with a long shot of an older woman lying on a bed (who we presume to be Witt’s mother) raises her hand to a young child, while a young man (possibly Witt) sits and watches; in the background of the image, a bird hops in a cage, as blue light washes out the windows (perhaps, in Witt’s memory, this blue light functions as a synecdoche for the heaven to which he believes his mother has passed). The flashback proceeds to close-ups of the bird, and of the young girl (we hear, on the soundtrack, her heartbeat). We never learn who this girl is; in the next image we see her embracing the young man we believe to be Witt, and in the final image the camera tilts upwards to the ceiling of the bedroom. It is at this point that the image of the bedroom fades into a superimposition of the blue ocean of the Melanesian paradise in which Witt sits. Through representing Witt’s memory of his mother’s death in this way, Malick encourages us to recognize that her death is not an event with a meaning easily transmittable in either Witt’s or the film’s own social discourse. This flashback is not about the “reality” of her death as delivered to us, or Witt’s interlocutor, through legible discourse, but is only Witt’s non-discursive, imagistic memory of it (and this reminds us of his distance from it as well, the distance enabling all memories). Nonetheless, an understanding of her mortality (and this “immortality” which some have told him exists) remains something Witt desires to know. In large part his motivates his interactions with others and what he calls his “love for Charlie Company.”
What the film suggests is that this desire for something that is impossible – that is, a desire to understand another’s death as an event through which one may make social meaning – acutely emerges from the experience of war itself. But despite this desire, when the death of another does reach some level of social discourse in the film, it frequently functions only to demonstrate the inhumanity of war. Consider, for example, two sequences involving the confrontation of an American soldier with a Japanese prisoner of war. In the first, the American soldier, Private Dale (Arie Verveen), spits in the face of the Japanese and puts two cigarettes into his nostrils to block the smell of the dead and dying prisoners around him. In speaking to one of the prisoners, he recognizes the finitude of the dying Japanese, but refuses to discursively acknowledge any connection between his own experience and the experience of this man, and in doing so eschews any recognition of the Japanese man’s humanity (in fact, he actively denies such humanity):

I’m gonna sink my teeth in your liver. You’re dyin’. See them birds up there?

[Looks up at carrion birds circling overhead]. They gonna eat you raw. Where you’re goin’, you’re not comin’ back from.

The Japanese prisoner speaks back to Dale; the words are not translated via subtitles for the viewer who does not speak Japanese, although Michel Chion’s study of the film cites a translation affirming that the prisoner is telling Dale that he, too, will die one day. Given that the two cannot understand the other’s language, no dialogue is reached here, and even without the linguistic barrier, it would be clear enough that Dale treats the Japanese as nothing more than dehumanized material.
Later in the film, in a moving sequence scored to Charles Ives’ piece *The Unanswered Question*, Dale appears to have recognized the inhumanity of his own actions: sitting alone in the rain during his company’s one-week leave after the battle (and placed by Malick in a long shot so as to emphasize his isolation), he contemplates the bag of teeth which he has removed from the corpses of Japanese soldiers. Recalling, in flashback, the earlier conversation with the prisoner, Dale weeps and throws away the bag (responding to it now in horror, as if it has finally dawned on him the nature of its contents), while Train’s voice-over appears once again, telling us the following: “War doesn’t ennoble men. It turns them into dogs. Poisons the soul.” We hear, after this voice-over and as if cued by Dale’s flashback, the voice of the Japanese soldier which we recall from the earlier scene, intoning that Dale will also die. It is almost as if Dale could understand these foreign words now (and Train’s words as well); he here recognizes his own finitude by virtue of recognizing the humanity of the Japanese soldier. Yet despite these three rhyming elements in this sequence (Dale’s epiphany, Train’s voice, and the flashback to the dying Japanese prisoner) which would seem to suggest a collective link across different experiences of mortality in war, each of these elements also nevertheless exists in isolation. It is only in isolation from the Japanese soldier that Dale can imagine making meaning of the event of his death. Malick’s use of space and sound here, and elsewhere, is not socialized, even though it is poetically intersubjective; in other words, although it serves to connect the experiences of soldiers across a series of images and sounds, for Dale, Train, and the Japanese soldier this interconnection is not brought to a discursive level, as they are never seen together in the same image and the presence of
their voices is marked, in each case, by a temporal difference (the time at which point Train thinks or says these words is, in fact, not discernable at all). Instead, this is again an instance of Malick’s practice of parataxis, which takes previously discordant, isolated elements and joins them together so as to create, within this film, a feeling of collective experience that has yet to be brought to discursive consciousness or social realization.

Another way to put this is that only we as viewers can inscribe the film with a collective significance that is felt only emotionally in the diegesis. As the next section will explore further, while the film clearly endeavors to connect the experiences of its various characters, it seeks to do this aesthetically rather than discursively, for the social discourse most typically evident in the film is repeatedly shown to be unable to frame the experience of the war in anything but divisive and inhuman terms. Like relatively traditional war film such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Thin Red Line* depicts the fighting of the war as an unavoidably collective, and what results in the film is a composite picture of several soldiers’ experiences. But as we have seen, unlike other war films, Malick’s effort does not settle on any single explanation. It represents instead a more open search for the right terms through which to explain the war, and a belief that these terms are, ultimately, not the property of any single individual depicted in the film.

**A Moving Box**

Even if certain characters desire some sort of connection with their fellow soldiers, part of what prevents these soldiers (and the film itself) from inscribing a collective truth onto their experience of the war is not only the fact of the radically private nature of death
itself, but also the fact that their experience of their own mortality is shown to be situated within the army’s social hierarchy. Unlike *Saving Private Ryan*, which unites its various characters – and the different ranks they hold – through an abstract, idealized sense of brotherhood and nationalistic purpose (a purpose which, in turn, grants meaning to each of the individual deaths depicted in the film), *The Thin Red Line* views the army’s social structure as inherently divisive and alienating and, as I have already suggested, one that cannot ultimately give meaning to the deaths witnessed by characters in the film. Michael Hammond suggests a similar point when he writes that the film, “with the camera consistently moving between a number of different soldiers…articulates the structures of power under which they labor.” It is not only the camera, however, but the narrative structure as a whole which insists upon this hierarchy, a metaphor for which can be found in the ship which carries C-for-Charlie Company to the Solomon Islands at the beginning of the film. At once driven by the forward, horizontal momentum across the water that carries all of the men to the Guadalcanal, the ship is also a vertical structure, its various levels occupied by men of different ranks of power. In the first sequence on the ship, Nolte’s Colonel Tall stands looking across the ocean at the island, while below him Penn’s Sergeant Welsh admonishes Witt for going AWOL. Also beneath the ship are Captain Staros and the various men who answer to his authority, including Private Bell. Each of these characters confronts death in a way unique to him, but the ranks of the characters remind us throughout that not all are given the same degree of agency.

*The Thin Red Line*, then, insists upon not only the isolation of the individual self as it results from both the confrontation with one’s own finitude, but also the way in
which the social structure of the army occludes any effort to understand that confrontation as a collective one. Like Jean Renoir’s *Grand Illusion* (1937), Malick’s war film is frank about the potentially disabling nature of humanity’s fictional social constructs, such as the hierarchies and nationalistic ideologies which prevent human beings from recognizing what is shared in their experience. Also like Renoir’s film, it also counters the fiction of disabling social structures with a feeling of interconnection that attempts to establish a truth about the experience of war which resorts not to the ideology which is seen as divisive in the first place. Indeed, part of the reason why the meaning of death cannot be brought to discursive consciousness in *The Thin Red Line* is simply because the language “ready-at-hand” in the film’s world, exemplified best in Tall’s orders to his inferiors, or Dale’s inhuman disregard for the Japanese POW, is too imbued with a power structure that prevents dialogue in the first place. In this sense, the film is just as much about the search for another language through which the experience of war might be shared as it is about the limitations of the world as it is presently constituted. When Witt wonders, at one point, whether “all men got one big soul,” this is not merely a naïve belief in some kind of pantheism, but the search for a language with which to make meaning of his confrontation with finitude that does not resort to the discourse itself responsible for perpetuating the phenomenon of war. The film itself, not reducible to Witt’s perspective, does not necessarily ascribe to his belief in pantheism, but it does practice an open-ended arrangement of imagery that represents its own search for a cinematic discourse that might circumvent the kinds of unity previous war films have espoused. The film achieves this unity by allowing its viewer to apprehend
connections between characters and their subjectivities without consigning the meaning of the war to any single one of them.

The social structure of the army, then, divides as much as it unites the soldiers in *The Thin Red Line*. But another mode of organization lies at the heart of Malick’s aesthetic patterns. In the absence of any single historical truth, the film achieves its aesthetic unity through the creation of a non-discursive intersubjectivity, founded a number of intersecting frameworks through which the characters make meaning of the war (or, to recall our earlier, cinematic metaphor, different “moving boxes.”) The sequence involving Dale, Train’s voice-over, and the Japanese POW, discussed in the previous section, is one example of this strategy that informs the film’s shape as a whole. These “moving boxes” often take the form of myths emerging from each character’s experience. Each of these myths, or personal narratives, offer a different frame through which the immediate reality of the war is interpreted and each, in their way, is concerned with replacing what is felt to be an inadequate and frequently meaningless social structure (the army itself) with a desire for another, possible world. Each of these worlds are different: while Witt’s is based on a sense of love and care, Tall’s is based on individual glory through destruction of others. What connects these various ways of looking at the world are the liminal spaces in which they are articulated. It is not during the battle sequences, but before and after them, as characters wait for battle against the vast landscape of the Gudalcanal, that Malick’s characters make sense of the battle they have been asked to fight. In a sense, each of them projects their own narrative, or myth,
onto this landscape, refusing to let the structure of the army itself determine the meaning of the war they are presently fighting.

Before examining these myths, and the ways they intersect, more closely, it is worth exploring the function of Malick’s landscapes more broadly, for it is in relation to the landscape that each character’s framework for interpreting the war emerges. While the film contains several visceral, realistic battle sequences, *The Thin Red Line* gains its sense of immediacy and tactility from the lush flora and fauna of the Solomon Islands as much as it does from the depictions of the battle itself. It is thus worth bringing to mind the difference between *setting* and *landscape* in cinema. As Martin Lefebvre has shown, setting helps create a *narrative mode* in film, for setting “is above all else the space of story and event: it is the scenery of and the theatre for what will happen.” Filmed environments become settings when they are understood primarily as backdrops to narrative events and the goals of characters. Landscapes, on the other hand, function relatively autonomously from narrative through what Lefebvre calls the *spectacular mode*, occurring either when the spectator’s gaze is encouraged to look upon a filmed environment in ways that are not directly related to narrative, or when the spectator resists the forward movement of the narrative and thus turns what was intended as a setting into a landscape. For Lefebvre, spectators can “discover” landscapes in narrative films that appear to be using the environment only as a setting, as he discusses in relation to the reception of the films of John Ford:

Such commentary testifies, if only by its existence, to the ability of spectators to contemplate the filmic space and to bring out landscape by looking at it with an
autonomising gaze. This way of gazing at images of the natural world (whether they be Ford’s or someone else’s), the sensibility that it attests to, is the source of our desire to speak of them, to analyze and interpret them either with regard to the qualities they exhibit on their own or in the way that we project them onto the narrative in order to connect them with themes or symbolic concerns, that is, to find some meaning in them that goes way beyond their narrative function as setting.48

This mode of spectatorship, taking pleasure in the filmed environments of narrative films in ways that declare it as something more than just a setting, results in what Lefebvre calls “a **doubly temporalised landscape**…it is subject simultaneously to the temporality of the cinematographic medium and to that of the spectator’s gaze, which is given to shifting from the narrative to the spectacular mode and back again from one moment to the next.”49 Recalling Deleuze’s terminology, we might say that the spectacular mode seizes upon a movement-image (the setting) and turns it into an open-ended time-image (a landscape) whose meaning has yet to be articulated.

Each of *The Thin Red Line*’s characters develops his own relationship to the landscape, and as in Deleuze’s cinema of the time-image, their encounter becomes our encounter as viewers. Malick thus turns this desire to experience the landscape apart from a linear narrative, a desire evident in the reception of John Ford’s classical films, into a component of the experience of his characters, frequently freeing the natural landscape from the foreword movement of the Battle of Guadalcanal (and from the instrumental social hierarchy of the army itself). The very first sequence of the film, for example, does
not so much begin the story as it depicts an immediate departure from the narrative before it is even underway, as Witt goes AWOL from the army, luxuriating in the glow of the Melanesian islands and projecting upon the native peoples the ideal connection and community he struggles to achieve with his fellow soldiers. Even the forward movement of the battle itself results in moments that are best described as time-images rather than action-images: after Charlie Company’s landing on the Solomon Islands, for instance, which in the traditional war film would cue the first battle sequence (just such a landing inspires the twenty-minute battle which opens *Saving Private Ryan*), the soldiers are met not with a fight but with the discovery that the Japanese have already advanced several miles ahead of them. What results is not the anticipated battle but an encounter with the natural landscape that is so unfamiliar to them (one soldier describes the strangeness of what he has seen by noting that “they’ve got fish living in the trees,” and the natives, who regard the Americans with either bemusement or indifference, function as another signifier of this strangeness).

If by going AWOL, then, Witt resists the “narrative” of the war and seeks out his own affection- and perception-images in the landscape, this is in fact a frequent occurrence throughout the film and amongst different characters. Fixing on the landscape in this way performs, for these soldiers, a defamiliarizing function, resulting not so much in a single “truth” about the Solomon Islands themselves, but a myth through which the characters can negotiate their experience of the war. This is why critics who have accused Malick of bringing a colonial gaze to the native peoples and the natural landscape are ultimately mistaken.\(^{50}\) While it is true that Witt idealizes the Melanesians he encounters
in the opening scene as a “natural innocence” which throws the corruption of his civilized society into relief, this is his myth, and not the film’s. As Jacob Leigh suggest, Witt’s voice and point-of-view, in contrast to critics who have considered his perspective as a surrogate for Malick’s own, “do not comprise the film’s themes and ideas: [other] scenes – in the brig, on deck with the officers and down below with the company – all introduce other perspectives.” But even Leigh attributes too much to Witt, reading the film’s first sequence, in which Witt goes AWOL on the Melanesian island, as issuing directly from the character’s perspective. Another look at this opening sequence suggests, as Leigh argues, Witt’s perspective, but also a perspective which exceeds Witt’s own. Indeed, it is this open space which provides for both our own apprehension of Malick’s imagery and the experience of other characters.

After the film’s first three shots of the alligator and the clearing of light through the trees, Malick brings us to the Melanesian landscape in a series of shots that depict the life of the natives. In each of their activities – swimming, arranging and collecting rocks, opening coconuts – they are depicted by Malick as a social group engaged in collective activity rather than individual endeavor. Witt, on the contrary, appears by himself, having gone AWOL from the army (he is on the island with one other, unnamed soldier, although the two are infrequently depicted together and even Witt’s conversation with this man feels like a monologue). While successfully conveying to the viewer Witt’s love for the Melanesians and the environment in which they live, many of the shots, rather than establishing Witt’s point-of-view, simply establish Witt’s presence within this landscape. For example, the second shot after Witt’s first appearance in the film – a shot
of a single Meleansian boy walking on the shore – would appear to be a point-of-view from Witt’s perspective. Yet the third shot in the sequence establishes that Witt is looking at a pair of Melanesian men rowing a boat behind him, and not the boy. Further, we never see the men through Witt’s eyes; they simply pass in the background of the image. The three shots, then, rather than generating the suture characteristic of most classical films, in fact avoids such suture, depicting Witt, the boy, and the Melanesian men as autonomous elements of a landscape open to Witt’s gaze but not fully definable through it. This idea is not contradicted, in fact, by the point-of-view shots which do in fact exist in the opening sequence; even when we see what Witt is looking at in a corresponding image – as in his glance at a naïve family bathing in the ocean – Malick is also able to establish through such constructions not only Witt’s perspective of the Melanesians but also the fact that he exists apart from them, and thus that any meaning he attributes to their existence emerges from his own experience, rather than from any truth regarding the Melanesians themselves.

What Malick does acknowledge, however, is that Witt’s mythical idealization of the Melanesians emerges from a resistance to the narrative the army would seek to impose on his experience. This becomes evident in Witt’s first conversation with Welsh after returning to the army in the film’s second sequence. Welsh, Witt’s superior in rank, admonishes Witt for going AWOL again. The conversation, nominally punitive, clearly revolves around Witt’s becoming as a soldier, evident when Welsh tells him: “The truth is, you can’t take straight duty in my company. You’ll never be a real soldier.” While this is a conversation that initially serves to reflect Welsh’s superiority in rank over Witt (he
begins the sequence standing up, above Witt), Malick shoots them in a series of shot/reaction-shots in close-up, implying an intimacy in their interchange which has little to do with army hierarchy. Indeed, the shift in the conversation becomes more personal and philosophical as it continues. “In this world, a man, himself, is nothin’,” Welsh tells Witt, “And there ain’t no world but this one.” Witt counters by telling Welsh he believes in another world, clearly evoking the Melanesian paradise he has enjoyed in the film’s opening sequence, and perhaps a belief in a transcendental heaven as well. But as the sequence soon makes clear, he understands this “other world” in immanent terms, too, for Witt’s desire for another world is more concretely manifest in the care he shows other soldiers (in the aftermath of later battle sequences, he will be shown caring for the wounds of fellow soldiers) and, indeed, in this conversation itself (Witt tells Welsh he sees a “spark” in him, something which transcends Welsh’s cold, nihilistic materialism). Transcendence for Witt is here felt to be within immanence, a product of his embodied engagement with the landscape and with others.

Rather than privileging only Witt’s perspective, then, the poetically intersubjective form of The Thin Red Line develops interlocking patterns across different encounters with the landscape, even when the myths characters are shown to project onto the landscape are shown to be ultimately incompatible. The one visual element within the landscape that connects most of these characters is the presence (and occasional salient absence) of water, an appropriate motif for a film that insists upon not strong and fast bonds between characters but rather a more fluid and dynamic intersubjectivity. Witt’s journey by ocean to Melanesia accounts for one of these narrative trajectories, but Bell,
Tall, Staros, and Welsh also construct their own myths (except in Welsh’s case, for it his lack of any explanatory framework which reflects a belief in the meaninglessness of the world). Each of these characters expresses a different understanding of the world through their gaze, a gaze which turns the narrative’s setting into a more open landscape, thus undergoing a distinct “being-toward-death” which resists the instrumental narrative of the army in favor of a myth which ascribes to their (potential) death a more personal significance. As we will see, the various meanings these characters ascribe to their own experiences are unified only by the eventual loss of the world of meaning each of them builds.

Of these five characters, it is Bell’s narrative which is, in some respects, the most traditional in the film, at least in the way Malick harnesses some rather familiar World War II conventions to tell his story. In his first appearance, we learn of the wife he has left back home. His loyalty to her is, in fact, the reason he is at war: initially employed as an officer in the corps of engineers, Bell grew to miss his wife, and resigned his commission so he would be able to return home. The corps, angry at his resignation, granted his request but promised him that he would be drafted into the army as an infantry private. While another soldier, talking with Bell prior to the landing on Guadalcanal, is quick to blame the army for Bell’s situation, he himself refuses to do this, for he prefers to spend his time remembering his wife, memories which the viewer is shown in a series of flashbacks. Malick has followed a staple of the World War II film, the memory of the wife back home, which, as Tania Modleski has pointed out, is in most traditional combat films a threat to the soldier’s survival (she points to the cliché wherein
the soldier who “displays a photograph of his girlfriend, wife, or family” and is thus “doomed to die by the end of the film.” But Bell does not die in the film, and he possesses no photograph of Marty that might link her to some objective, documented reality. Bell’s memories are instead depicted through a series of flashbacks that mix a dream-like fantasy with reality. While we are clearly meant to understand that Bell’s wife, Marty (Miranda Ott), actually exists – the letter he receives from her near the end of the film confirms this, if there was any doubt – the flashbacks are heavily romanticized and idealized; to some extent we can read Bell’s idealization of his own wife as a parallel to Witt’s projection of innocence and purity onto the Melanesians. What we see is not Marty herself, but rather Marty as Bell would like to remember her. She is not a woman in this memory, but rather a woman-as-myth, a kind of Eve before the fall (a structural parallel to Witt’s belief in Melanesia as an earthly paradise). The only images of her that come untethered to Bell’s subjective imagination profess this “fall,” for they appear immediately prior to his discovery of her letter in which she tells him she is leaving him for another man.

Bell’s flashbacks of his ideal Marty, however, do not really emerge from this one conversation he has about her with another soldier. Instead, they are shown as evoked by the landscape of the Guadalcanal itself. While Bell sits in his bunker on the ship, prior to both his first flashback of Marty and the Company’s landing on the Guadalcanal, we hear the sound of the ocean as the ship progresses towards the island. As Bell’s first flashback appears on-screen, this sound of water continues, but is now linked to the body of water seen in his memory, which depicts Marty and Bell standing on a pier holding hands.
Bell’s lightly fantasized memory of his wife is not only evoked by the film’s landscape, however; it also gives him the means through which to endure the hardships which the war against this landscape presents. As the Company prepares to land, Malick shows us the faces of soldiers terrified at the prospect of the battle they are about to wage. One of these images is of Bell, whose voice-over accompanies the montage: “Why should I be afraid of death? I belong to you…If I go first, I’ll wait for you there, on the other side of the dark waters. Be with me now.” It is clearly Marty (or Bell’s idealized memory of Marty) that allows Bell to face the grueling experience of war and assign to it meaning (that his loyalty to his wife is in fact meaningful, that the two of them, as another voice-over later puts it, form “one being” that “flows together like water til I can’t tell you from me.”

Whereas the memory of the woman in the traditional World War II film would seem to function as the cliché which guarantees the death of a soldier, Marty, at least prior to Bell’s reading of her letter near the end of the film, functions as a symbol of protection. The water so central to Bell’s engagement with the landscape suggests that in addition to an idealized, prelapsarian Eve, he also imagines Marty as a protective, maternal figure. In the Jones novel, Bell’s relationship with his wife is highly sexualized and corporeal, but the flashbacks in the film – while depicting the couple in a sensual embrace – are nearly ethereal and disembodied, establishing Marty as less a corporeal presence than a ghostly, and only vaguely erotic, specter who protects Bell as he goes to war. That such an association emerges from the Guadalcanal itself in Bell’s experience codes the environment as female and the spectator as male, evoking a relationship with
landscape which Guy Rosolato has also noted of the paintings of Claude Lorrain. \(^{53}\) Marty is figured as a maternal protector even in sequences in which the water motif is not overtly present. Roughly halfway through the film, Bell leads a small group of soldiers across a hill in order to establish the presence of Japanese soldiers. As he crawls along the landscape (Bell is often depicted prostrate on the ground, either still in memory or crouched on his stomach so as to avoid the enemy’s gunfire, a physical relation to the landscape which evokes a memory of his physical relationship with his wife) he is literally enveloped by the fields of grass in the landscape. Malick’s viewer, too, is given a similar feeling; while we are clearly preoccupied here with Bell’s goal, the Guadalcanal is not, here, a mere setting for the campaign but rather a fount of visual texture and detail that exceeds anything Bell in particular is trying to accomplish in his role as private. As he crawls along the ground the film flashes back once again to Marty, in a sequence in which she is again associated with the maternal motif of water. Just as Lorrain’s landscapes for Rosolato allow us to “discover our being fortuitously contained by immensity, with even an oceanic feeling of exaltation, in the most maternal sense,” it is not only the landscape itself which here envelops and protects Bell (he crouches low within it so as to hide himself from the gaze of the enemy), but it also the memory of Marty who inscribes a protective and self-reassuring meaning onto an encounter with his own finitude. Indeed, it is this protection that is lost after Bell receives her “Dear John” letter near the end of the film. After Bell reads the letter, he stands in front of a line of trees and army vehicles in an extreme long shot, as if looking to the landscape for some
sign of another potential meaning now that his own world, his Edenic myth of Marty, has collapsed.

Within the army’s hierarchy, Bell is only a private. Above him in rank, indeed above all of the other depicted characters (with the exception of a Brigadier General played by John Travolta, who is seen only briefly in the film’s first act), is Colonel Tall, who directs the American attempt to wrest control of the Guadalcanal from the Japanese. Certain contrasts become evident between the meaning Tall and Bell ascribes to the landscape. Whereas water evokes for Bell the protective, ideal memory of Marty, for Tall it is a source of resentment. Looking out onto the Pacific Ocean which separates the ship from the Guadalcanal at the beginning of the film, a flood of bitter memories are invoked, communicated to the audience via voice-over: “Worked my ass off. Brownnosing the generals. Degraded myself. For them and my family. My home.” It is clear that for Tall his family is not a source of meaning or protection, as Marty is for Bell, but rather a source of shame. This is further clarified in a later conversation with Captain Gaff (John Cusack), in which he admits his disgust of his son, who did not choose a career in the army. Gaff, who successfully carries out a mission for Tall, becomes like a surrogate son to the elder colonel (Gaff, via Cusack’s uncharacteristically placid performance, becomes a tabula rasa upon which the fiery Tall can project his desire for glory in battle). If the army’s social structure becomes a surrogate family for Tall, he must reinforce this by refusing his soldiers the one thing which reminds him of his blood relations, that is, water. Repeatedly informed that the company is running out of water, Tall acknowledges its importance but refuses to take the time to wait for reinforcements, insisting upon the
forward movement of the battle and the fulfillment of his desire for glory. Rather than water, which is an obstruction to Tall’s bid for glory, it is fire and its destruction which most links Tall to the landscape: rather than replenishing supplies, for example, Tall orders the launching of bombs ahead of battle to announce their presence to the Japanese; and he refers to the sunrise as a “rosy-fingered dawn,” evoking Homer’s historical myths as a precedent in his own stab at achieving glory.

Tall’s narrative is the one in the film which reminds us that simply because a narrative is constructed in resistance to something else, it does not necessarily make that narrative progressive. Tall likens himself to a character in a Greek myth not so much for the betterment and care of his soldiers, but rather as a means to achieve a glory that has so far been denied to him by the army. In a conversation with Capt. Gaff (John Cusack), who has reminded the Colonel of the importance of sending for reinforcements and water, Tall defends his decision to progress ahead with battle despite the exhaustion of his battalion:

I’ve waited all my life for this. I’ve worked, slaved, eaten untold buckets of shit to have this opportunity and I don’t intend to give that up. You don’t know what it feels like to passed over. You’re young. You’re just out of the Academy. You’ve got your war. This fifteen years, this is my first war!

The rank Tall has in the army is clearly inadequate to his vision of himself; his first appearance in the film, discussing battle strategies with Travolta’s Brigadier General, is imbued by Nolte’s performance with the tacit resentment he feels while talking to a superior soldier much younger than he. It is not the army itself that gives Tall the
meaning he needs to achieve glory; more frequently, Tall is seen to desire to rewrite his very role as Colonel, as one of his more despairing voice-overs suggests: “Shut up in a tomb. Can’t lift the lid. Played a role I never conceived.” If other characters, too, are not entirely comfortable with the roles into which the army casts them, Tall is the one in a position to reshape his role, given his relatively lofty perch in the army’s hierarchy.

By denying his men the water which for him, as for Bell, symbolizes a connection with the family back home, Tall is able to shape the Charlie Company into another family of which he is the patriarch. But the character does not justify his authority abstractly; Nolte’s performance as Tall, as Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit have suggested, is instead characterized only as an “embodiment of pure will,” an intensity emerging not from a patriotic ideal but from Tall’s sense that without victory in this battle his career in the army will have been a failure. Despite the fact that his trajectory is inevitably connected to that of the other soldiers, even if only because of his position of authority, it is clear enough that his search for glory ultimately leaves Tall as perhaps the most isolated figure in the film. Like Bell’s prelapsarian Marty, Tall’s Homeric war, after it is has served its purpose, ultimately leaves the character with little meaning to retain. After the Battle of Guadalcanal is over, Tall grants to his men a one-week leave. This announcement should be a moment of celebration, bridging the divide which Tall has created between himself and in his men is read to the men not by him but by Sgt. Welsh. As the men rush into the ocean to celebrate their leave, Tall is conspicuously absent. His use of his “family,” like his myth, having been exhausted, the last image we see of Tall in the film (which, structurally, appears almost an hour before the film is over, suggesting that Tall’s own
myth is dwarfed by the larger reality of the war) is of him sitting alone in the Japanese
camp which the Americans now control after their victory in battle. Tall sits amidst the
conquered enemy’s former dwelling, but this is hardly a moment out of Homer, nor the
moment of glory towards which Tall’s entire narrative appeared to have been headed.
Instead, Tall is filmed by Malick in a series of images which convey emptiness more than
the spoils of war: Tall sits alone in a long shot and files at a knife while other soldiers
celebrate, while the wind chimes of what was formerly a Japanese stronghold remind
him, perhaps, of the transience of this victory. Guadalcanal, once appropriated by Tall
through the lens of Homeric mythology, in this scene strangely bereft of meaning; at the
one moment in which Tall’s victory might have finally bestowed upon the preceding
battle a retrospective significance, what Tall experiences here is emptiness, a lack of
significance.

The character whose trajectory most directly intersects with Tall’s is Captain
Staros, who is directly under Tall’s command. Staros, like Tall, views the men under his
command as a surrogate family, and tells them as much: “You’ve been like my sons.”
Then in a voice-over, to himself: “You are my sons. My dear sons. You live inside me
now. I’ll carry you wherever I go.” Unlike Tall, however, who draws upon Greek
mythology to justify his self-serving commands, Staros is himself Greek (in fact, in
telling the men that he views them as sons, he first speaks this line in Greek prior to
translating it for them, a kind of dialogical answer to Tall’s earlier monologue in Greek).
Malick is not necessarily implying that Staros has some link to a Greek essence which
Tall lacks; instead, the contrast between the two characters rather suggests that while Tall
views himself as a patriarch by virtue of his authority (and his ability to imbue that
authority with his own thirst for glory via recourse to Greek mythology), Staros
consistently, reflexively questions the validity of the principles through which he leads
his men. Occasionally this involves directly confronting Tall’s confidence and assurance
in the battle plan; in one crucial scene, Tall refuses to carry his men into combat when it
will almost certainly mean the demise of almost all of them. He also repeatedly asks Tall
for reinforcements, in particular the request for water which the colonel ignores
throughout the battle. His existential engagement with the landscape of the Guadalcanal
is thus not an appropriation of it through the frame of an already articulated law – Staros
does not subject his principles to the authority of the army’s social hierarchy – but rather
is a search for the reasons which might justify his conduct in war. Staros accepts the fact
that the landscape against which the battle is fought will not simply bend to human
demands (when Tall demands that they attack the Japanese army by heading directly up a
hill, rather than around it, Staros, because of the lack of water to replenish the strength of
his soldiers, insists upon this as a tactical impossibility). He seeks not to impose a global
meaning in advance of his experience of war but to rather derive from it the principles
through which he might responsibly and ethically lead his men.

In one shot, prior to the conflict with Tall just mentioned, Staros stands against
the expanse of the Guadalcanal mountains during sunset, one of the film’s many liminal
moments before and after a battle sequence. Far from consigning this landscape as terrain
that must be conquered, Staros’ contemplation here provokes his search for the reasons
that might justify his authority over other soldiers. In the next images he is shown
praying: “Are you there? Let me not betray you. Let me not betray my men. In you I place my trust.” Staros’ appeal to a deity (paralleling, in some respects, the spiritual connection Witt feels with the Melanesian islands) does not grant him an already articulated law by which he might guide his men by; unlike Tall, who never questions his authority, Staros’ entire journey through the film is a search for a law through which he might ethically guide his men, and his prayer is shown by Malick to be only a request for the strength to conduct that search. Staros, in this respect, loses his search for meaning not necessarily through its collapse, as is the case with Bell and Tall, but rather through the simple fact that he is dismissed from the battle. Tall, deeming Staros too cowardly to function as a Captain, dismisses him with a Purple Heart (a moment which provides further evidence that Tall puts more value into his own personal mythology than in emblems such as the Purple Heart which emerge from the army as an institution). Yet Staros holds onto the belief that he has acted as a wise father to his men throughout the film.

If these three aforementioned characters each follow their own kind of narrative trajectory, the motif of water – connecting Bell and Tall to their lives back home, Welsh to the Melanesians, and Staros to the soldiers whom he commands – and the relationship with the landscape more generally, serves to connect all of them. Only Welsh avoids association with this motif. He is instead linked with the solid ground of the Earth, repeatedly referring to the world as “a rock.” His nihilistic, materialistic existentialism remains untethered to the water that might serve to connect him with others. But Welsh, nevertheless, does betray a desire for human connection, in his acts of bravery, for
example, and his obvious concern for other soldiers. What most conveys this desire for human connection are the three conversations he has with Witt throughout the film.

Indeed, these three scenes suggest that the narrative trajectories of Witt and Welsh are closely intertwined, for theirs is the one relationship in the film which attempts to bring the encounter of one’s finitude to the level of social discourse, ultimately testifying to the impossibility of framing the event of one’s death within a dialogue with another, yet nonetheless suggesting the importance of such an attempt. Each of their three conversations, one appearing in each hour of the film, develops Witt’s and Welsh’s separate understanding of their existential, finite existence.

In the first conversation, which we have already discussed, Witt is briefly brought to a moment of doubt about the validity of his belief in another world (as Welsh attempts to convince him that there is only “one world,” Malick is careful to show us, in close-up, a moment of doubt in Witt’s face, paired with a line of dialogue which suggests that perhaps the other world he saw “was only in my imagination.”) Yet Witt confirms this belief in another, possible world in the next two conversations with Welsh. In the second, he and Welsh sit, in a moment before battle, in the middle of a field of grass; shot by Malick in a conventional shot/reverse-shot structure, the variations in their points of view nonetheless suggest their differences in perspective. Welsh’s view of Witt is shot in a telephoto lens, throwing the character out of focus and thus cleaving him from the surrounding environment. Witt’s view of Welsh, however, is shot with a wider lens, with several soldiers sitting in the background in focus, effectively establishing that Witt sees Welsh as part of a social whole while Welsh is content to view Witt just as he views
himself: as an island. Welsh is the only one who speaks in this conversation (he speaks yet again of his belief that the attempt to care for others in war is meaningless) yet Witt seems to speak with his eyes; he looks up at the sky, as if to tell Welsh of a transcendent realm somewhere above their embodied existence, but accessible within it.

In some respects, other sequences in the film suggest that Witt’s message to Welsh has been felt by the latter. Certain sequences prior to this final conversation have shown Welsh capable of caring for others, the same kind of care that he has otherwise disavowed in his conversations with Witt, in one scene risking his own life to deliver pain-killing drugs to a dying soldier on the battlefield. While on the company’s leave, Welsh and Sgt. Storm (John C. Reilly) discuss a wounded soldier dying in the company’s medical tent. “I look at that boy dyin’, I don’t feel nothin’,” Storm says. “I don’t care about nothing anymore.” Welsh responds, somewhat uncharacteristically, given his repeatedly stated belief to Witt in his lack of care for others: “Sounds like bliss. I don’t have that feeling yet.” In their third and final conversation, Witt, too, testifies to something he has seen in Welsh, repeating again that he sees a “spark” in him and asking why the latter “makes himself out to be a rock” when in fact he does care for others. As the two characters have their final conversation, they walk circles around a small hut with clearings of light shining through in the roof (characteristically, Witt gazes through these during the scene, suggesting again his ongoing search for another world). Welsh, for the first time, spends less time disavowing any belief in the possibility of a different kind of world and more in wanting to know how one believes in such a world: “You still
believing in the beautiful light?” he asks Witt, but this time Welsh is asking not simply to disavow his belief in anything similar, but as if he would actually like to know.

The discourse between these two characters, more than any other in the film, suggests a shared desire to make sense of one’s finite existence and to do it in ways that might lead to the creation of a social world better than the one seen in the film. Witt’s death, in relation to this idea, functions ambiguously: it is at once intended as a sacrifice to protect the lives, at least temporarily, of his fellow soldiers (Witt successfully leads a Japanese attack away from the rest of the company, but at the expense of his own life), and is thus a kind of social event; yet it is a death, like all deaths, experienced alone. It is difficult to tell if Witt even believes in the sacrifice which might grant to it a larger social meaning, given that at the moment he is shot by the Japanese soldier he is in the act of raising his gun as if to defend himself against attack. Could it be that this final moment of Witt’s life not a moment of sacrifice for others, but a moment of doubt regarding the value of such a sacrifice? Is Witt suddenly regretting his decision to sacrifice his own life for the life of others? And might the act of killing the Japanese soldier – which Witt is in the process of attempting to do as he is killed – in fact contradict his desire to forge a better world, one free of the violence he has fled in the film’s first sequence? Because of the question surrounding Witt’s final act, interpretations of the film which have fixed on Witt’s death as a sacrificial gesture have been too quick to read his death as a social event. Malick films Witt’s “sacrifice” with a much deeper degree of ambiguity, suggesting again the ultimate impossibility of understanding the private experience of death as public and social.
In one regard, then, the film, like Heidegger’s concept of Dasein, conceives the making of meaning (or, as we have discussed it in this section, the construction of personal myths) within the frame of a finite human existence – that is, in relation to one’s death – as a fundamentally private experience. Heidegger’s concept, however, was not conceived on the battlefield; what is most devastating about his early philosophy (the context in which the concept of Dasein was first articulated) is that he conceives this private, individualistic self as characteristic of human beings in every possible environment. *The Thin Red Line* intervenes in our understanding of Dasein not by contesting Heidegger’s central claim that the search for Dasein is in large part an individual striving (the film, in some measure, would seem to support this notion, given how isolated the characters frequently are from one another), but through its poetic intersubjectivity, ultimately encouraging us to read Heidegger’s existential self as individualistic entity that nonetheless seeks sociability, even in conditions (such as war) in which it is ultimately impossible to attain. In this light, we can read Dasein in relation to the ability of a human agent to perform existentially authentic goals and projects through – and, in acts of resistance, perhaps even against – the given materials and ideas of an already existing culture and society. Mulhall limns a similar idea in his reading of Heidegger: “[T]he readiness-to-hand of objects for a particular Dasein is not (and could not conceivably be) understood as their readiness-to-hand for that Dasein alone; if any object is handy for a given task, it must be handy for every Dasein capable of performing it…readiness-to-hand is inherently intersubjective[.]”

Heidegger, however, too often errs on the side of pessimism when he considers the individual’s ability to be
simultaneously an authentic, existential self and a thoroughly social being. But despite
the devastation of war which *The Thin Red Line* so vividly shows us, Malick would seem
to be more optimistic, for he achieves an aesthetic unity in his film by reminding us that
the desire for social interconnection, even in those contexts in which it is a most arduous,
and perhaps impossible, undertaking, is still worth striving for. Even though *The Thin
Red Line* does not attain a single “truth,” then, its unity is far more authentic than the
traditional war film, which attempts to subsume the various experiences of individuals
who fight wars under the sign of a nationalistic ideology or patriotic sentiment. That sort
of unity is not intersubjective, but rather transsubjective, affirming the experiences of its
various characters as connected but only so as to link them to a meaning which, finally,
exceeds them.

By contrast, the possibility of a larger social meaning in *The Thin Red Line* is felt
even when the individual self who holds that meaning is either shown to die, or when
some event is shown to seriously disrupt that individual’s ability to continue to hold onto
meaning. Staros, for example, continues to believe in the value of his role as guiding
authority to his men, and even though he is dismissed from the army by Tall, his final
words resonate with his men and they seem to understand the loyalty Staros had to them
throughout the battle. As we have already seen, the meaning of Witt’s sacrifice (if it is
even a sacrifice) is ambiguous, but his burial near the end of the film signifies the
necessity of an ongoing search for meaning. Bell, depicted for the last time in this scene,
has perhaps found in Witt a memory that might replace what he has lost with his wife’s
request for a divorce. Only Welsh, by contrast, continues to insist on the impossibility of
finding any meaning in this war, for he espouses the same nihilism which he has espoused throughout the film: “Where’s your spark now?” are the only words he can manage.

The characters, despite the aesthetic and thematic patterns which connect them, arrive at no final closure of meaning, yet the viewer is finally left with the feeling that the search for meaning has been a worthwhile one. Indeed, it is a search in which the viewer of The Thin Red Line has equal purchase, for any firm ideological position regarding World War II, far from having been naturalized for the viewer through a classical depiction of war, has yet to be made (and the pressure to make this meaning, of course, will be felt not only by those who experienced the war but by every generation of historiographers who attempt to grapple with the conflict’s significance in light of later history). Appropriately, the film ends with time-images rather than closure: as the men we have become familiar with over the preceding three hours are shipped away from the Guadalcanal, we see another ship headed in the opposite direction, suggesting a circular rather than linear movement through time, and a sense within the diegetic world itself much of the war remains to be fought. But despite this lack of closure, the question of one’s finite existence is still felt to be one worth asking with and to others. In this way, Malick’s film both ascribes to Heidegger’s notion that the experience of death is a non-relational, non-social event and yet contests the claim that the desire to inscribe death itself with social meaning is meaningless. Even if the soldiers in the film are not shown to attain such meaning, this desire signifies something that is true, for The Thin Red Line, about the experience of war. “If I never meet you in this life,” Sergeant Welsh says after
Witt’s death, in a voice-over juxtaposed to a vision, from Welsh’s perspective, of a graveyard seen as the company leaves Guadalcanal for the final time, “let me feel the lack.” This line of dialogue, I think, suggests much about the shape of the film in which Welsh is seen, because the aesthetic unity of *The Thin Red Line* is, paradoxically, the product of this feeling of lack. In other words, that this feeling of lack, or a falling away, of meaning is felt, at some point and in some way, by every major character in the film is part of what gives *The Thin Red Line* its shape as a work of art.

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1 Charles Taylor mockingly referred to the film’s voice-overs as “the oblique/obvious nuggets of pseudo-Zen wisdom dropping” while Tom Whalen framed the entire film as “metaphysical gas.” See Taylor, “The Big Dead One,” in *Salon* (January 8 1999), accessible online at http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/reviews/1999/01/cov_09reviews.html; and Whalen, “‘Maybe All Men Got One Big Soul’: The Hoax within the Metaphysics of Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*,” in *Film/Literature Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1999), 162.


Lloyd Michaels documents Malick’s activities during his twenty-year absence from filmmaking in *Terrence Malick* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 18.


Lloyd Michaels, *Terrence Malick*, 57.


35 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity, 134.


40 Kaja Silverman, “All Things Shining,” 324.

41 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity, 132.

42 Kaja Silverman, All Things Shining, 326.


44 Stephen Mulhall, Heidegger and Being and Time, 118.

45 Michel Chion, The Thin Red Line (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 60.


48 Martin Lefebvre, “Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema,” 29.

49 Martin Lefebvre, “Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema,” 29.


54 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity, 136.
CHAPTER SEVEN: ON THE NEW WORLD

Imagining a New World

Malick’s revision of the legend of John Smith and Pocahontas, The New World, has been variously interpreted as both an old and new object, a film of tradition and summation on the one hand, and a work of creative renewal on the other. For Lloyd Michaels, who offers the possibility that the stirring final passage of the film might be the director’s “last cinematic testament,” The New World “inscribes the major elements of his oeuvre to date,” functioning as an intensification and amplification of the aesthetic and thematic values which have colored the director’s entire body of work.¹ James Morrison, meanwhile, noting the director’s continued interest in “the dual character of ‘nature’ and ‘beauty’ in different historical, social, and cultural contexts,” suggests that The New World goes farther than the earlier films in poeticizing the broken relationship between human beings and the natural environment: “Nature, once it takes its place in this radically sundered structure, can appear only as an image of failed transcendence, even if the film suggests the possibility of an authentic immanence with an ardency unmatched in this director’s work.”² For both critics, The New World is a film of last things, an elegy for a lost moment in history which preceded – but, if imagined and lived differently, might have prevented – a violent genocide that continues to haunt the American continent. It is also an intoxicatingly creative work of cinema, one insisting, like Malick’s first three films, on the creative and poetic possibilities of the historical cinematic
imagination, only now through a “far more diffuse, elliptical, and structurally radical” form than Malick’s earlier work.³

The film’s production, like its difficult structure and poetic imagery, also serves to confirm Malick’s relative separation from most contemporary Hollywood cinema. Instead of working under the shadows of the great filmmakers from the classical period – that anxiety of influence which David Bordwell sees in many contemporary Hollywood filmmakers – Malick’s production strategies on The New World instead continue to reflect an ongoing interest in the silent cinema, in particular the sinuous tracking camera of F.W. Murnau’s The Last Laugh (1925) and Sunrise (1927).⁴ Evident throughout The New World is a similarly roving, relatively autonomous camera, appearing interested in character movement but not beholden to it, just as likely to explore space on its own as the characters themselves are. Malick’s use of the steadicam, a penchant in his filmmaking since Days of Heaven but nowhere more evident than in his fourth film, evokes not only Murnau’s tracking camera but also the director’s own The Thin Red Line (a film that, as Michaels has also pointed out, functions as something of a diptych alongside The New World).⁵ Thus the steadicam, at once paralleling the film’s own theme of exploration and discovery, also establishes a difference in perspective relative to the explorers whose experience is dramatized in the film. In this way, The New World develops an ideologically complex regard for the phenomenon of colonialism through its style, in which lingering, roaming, circular camera movements (in conjunction with the film’s discontinuous cutting technique and elliptical structure) frequently function contrapuntally relative to the linear, causal devastation of the European colonial project.
More will be said about the film’s development of an interrelated style and content in the following pages. But perhaps the most logical inroads into an analysis of Malick’s fourth film is through the establishment of textual links to his three previous efforts. Within the terms of my own study, the film can be seen to offer instances of stylistic and thematic repetition – the motifs of the voice, the break between humanity and nature, and the uncertain journey all reappear – although those same terms can also help us understand the variation present in *The New World*. As in *Badlands*, *Days of Heaven*, and *The Thin Red Line*, the voice-over serves to guide us into the fictional world of the film, but more than ever Malick’s voices are destabilized in relation to their precise temporal, spatial, narrative, and even cultural coordinates. The voice thus retains at least partial status as *acousmêtre* in *The New World* as in Malick’s other films, developing an ongoing dialectical rather than finalized relationship to the fictional persons embodied on the visual track.

*The New World*, however, goes farther than the earlier works in its use of multiple and at times competing *acousmètreset*. In one early sequence shortly after the arrival of the European colonizers on American land, an unfinished structure – the skeleton of what is to be a colonial fort – is shot by Malick and cinematographer Emanuel Lubezki from a low angle as if to prefigure the majesty and grandeur no doubt desired in its construction, but as yet unattained. Unaware of any such intentions, but with intentions of his own, a Virginian Algonquin climbs to the top of the uncompleted fort’s highest point, looking out at the expanse of the landscape from the new perspective it provides. The native’s movement is ruptured by a jump-cut, drawing our attention to the constructed nature of
this segment and, in turn, echoing the film’s own theme of ongoing social and discursive reconstruction (and destruction) within the landscape of a new world. Accompanying this editing strategy in conveying this idea is the soundtrack, which includes two voices audibly superimposed on top of one another. One is diegetic, but temporally and spatially displaced (from when and where, exactly, it is hard to say, although we can safely infer it is prior to the moment we see on the film’s visual track): the voice of Christopher Newport (Christopher Plummer), who leads this colonial mission, imbuing his charges with the urgency of their task to construct a fort in preparation for winter. On top of Newport’s voice and this image of the Algonquin, is the private voice-over of Captain John Smith (Colin Farrell):

How many lands behind me?

How many seas?

What blows and dangers?

These are not the words of the historical Smith: instead, they allude directly to Virgil’s Aeneid, and gesture towards the kind of lyrical epic that viewers might expect of Malick in viewing The New World at this point in his career, coming as it does after the shift towards a more ardent and less ironic poetics in his late work with The Thin Red Line. In terms of the technique of the voice-over, however, these hesitant, querying, investigatory words – hardly the sure statements of the disciplined and disciplining conqueror we know from textbooks – are presented in tandem with the commanding voice of Newport and the tentative exploration of the Algonquin native we see on the screen. The native, further, offers us no indication of his own interiority; unlike Newport and Smith, his perspective
is communicated, at this point in the narrative, in visual rather than discursive terms (although that cultural vision, through the figure of Pocahontas, will slowly begin to suggest a significance of its own as the film unfolds). What Malick is giving us here, and elsewhere, is not only a multivocal presentation of history as in his previous film, *The Thin Red Line*, which suggested the divergent interiorities of several American soldiers in wartime, the crumbling of each myth brought to that treacherous experience, and the impossibility of any historical account doing justice to all of them. It is a more radically polyphonic palimpsest, in which voices are enfolded upon and at times in discord with one another, each making a claim or posing an implicit question about the meaning of the human being in relation to this landscape that is not always received, accepted, or answered by an interlocutor within the diegesis.

This particular example of the voice-over leads us to the second motif of the broken relationship between humanity and nature. Morrison’s observation that Malick’s fourth film is a more “radically sundered structure” than his previous efforts suggests certain changes in his presentation of nature. For Morrison, while the “nature imagery [in previous Malick films] often appeared in dissociated interludes between narrative segments, [in *The New World*] it is part of the narrative sequence, which is fractured not by their appearance, but from within.” In Malick’s earlier work, in the terms of my own study, nature is frequently felt as a time-image pressuring thought to think other than that which would compel it to accede to the sensory-motor schema of an already-articulated movement-image. The movement-image in Malick’s earlier films is figured in part by the plots directed and anchored by relatively powerful male figures such as Kit, Bill, and
Colonel Tall, who all project a narrative that is in each case a familiar cliché: the journey of the rebel without a cause, the search for the American dream, and the quest for military glory, respectively. The time-image interrupts these movements, although not always in ways recognized by the characters themselves. In *Badlands*, the inability of Kit and Holly to respond meaningfully to the natural landscapes they encounter across their journey generates much of the film’s irony, while in *Days of Heaven* the characters’ contact with the beauty of the Texas Panhandle is felt ultimately only as a liminal space apart from the new system of industrialized labor in which they are otherwise inscribed. It is only in *The Thin Red Line* that nature becomes very nearly omnipresent, figuring in almost every sequence as a kind of affect disrupting the linear, instrumental movement of the war effort. But although nature is everywhere shown as a phenomenon exceeding the ability of any single subject to comprehend it in *The Thin Red Line*, the characters’ experience of these overwhelming affects is still frequently interstitial, occurring in the nervous quietude of the space between battles rather than during the otherwise rather more obviously pressing effort of simply staying alive.

In *The New World*, too, nature figures in virtually every frame, but much of the film, rather than containing interludes, is felt as itself a kind of interlude within the devastating linearity of the colonial project (a project which lays the roots for the industrialization so brutally vivid in *Days of Heaven*). The first 90 minutes in particular, concerned with the first cultural contact between the English and the Algonquin, functions itself as a time-image, before the figure of John Rolfe (Christian Bale), far less outwardly resistant than Smith to certain aspects of the colonial project, emerges as a
patriarchal authority inscribing the forward thrust of a movement-image that Pocahontas (Q’Orianka Kilcher) will then do her best to resist. In this respect, perhaps the most telling among Malick’s unconventional stylistic choices throughout the film is the almost complete use of natural, rather than studio, lighting in the film’s cinematography, which allows nature to develop a distinct presence apart from the projects of the human beings depicted in the landscape. Emmanuel Lubezki, the film’s director of photography, discusses this poetic choice:

[T]his is basically a sunlit movie. When we were shooting, we were extra-aware of how everything in nature is constantly shifting. We became aware of the earth moving, the shadows changing, the color temperature constantly shifting, the rivers changing color, and the tide shifting, and all of that happens really fast. When you’re distracted, you don’t notice those changes. Shooting studio movies, you tend to want to control the elements, but on this picture we didn’t – we wanted to capture life. The moment we embraced life, we turned our backs on artificial light. I think the flow of nature became a theme of the movie.\(^8\)

As Lubezki goes on to note, this approach, so amenable to capturing the beauty of nature and no less resistant to standard Hollywood forms of production than Nestor Almendros’s work on *Days of Heaven*, is not always flattering to the human form, for an exclusive use of natural light “can distort a face or an object; people can look older or tired.”\(^9\) But just as the human being has no hierarchal place of mastery over the narrative in *The New World* (given the director’s rejection of conventional depictions of character psychology), nor does the human figure determine the visual composition of every shot. Nature
frequently stands autonomous relative to human beings, and the relationship between the landscape and the human figures becomes, as in all of Malick’s work, an open question.

Malick’s and Lubezki’s impressionistic lighting strategy, with its embrace of nature as something more than just a setting, complements a film that, although at times depicting the brutal project of European colonialism quite vividly, does not grant the colonists any privileged purchase over the narrative drive as a whole. Colonialism as a process – as cultural expansion, a cartographic re-mapping of consciousness, and a form of cultural oppression – is something the film only evokes in fits and starts. One example from the film will serve to illustrate this point. After a brief prologue and opening credits sequence, the film begins with the arrival of three European ships to American shores. The content of these grand, majestic images would not be out of place in any conventional historical film about European exploration and conquest circa the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. Malick, however, does not film and contextualize the images so as to situate our point-of-view from the perspective of a heroic narrative agent who stands atop one of these ships, grandly confident in his salient position in the development of history. Instead, the vessels are presented to us as a series of disorienting affects, viewed from contrapuntal perspectives. From the vantage point of the Algonquin, for example, who view the arrival of the ships from the shores they are not yet forced to know as the anglicized “Virginia,” the ships might very well be magical moving islands (a notion one of Malick’s chapter titles in the three-hour cut of the film alludes to) rather than instruments of European economic expansion. From the perspective of Newport, who stands on one of these vessels as its captain, the ship’s bow affords an expansive
view of the continent of which the camera also partakes. From this perspective the
American shore is felt not as a lived-in space, but as a vast expanse of pure potential, a
space that might serve as a European dwelling or a ground against which they might
establish their will. Yet Newport’s view also prefigures the tragic limitations of the
colony whose construction he will in large part direct, given that we also see him here
from behind the netting of a sail that operates figuratively as prison bars. This image, in
fact, initiates a visual motif wherein barriers erected by the Europeans on American land
function as cages separating them from nature as well as any prospects for a productive
social relation with the Algonquin. For Captain John Smith, meanwhile, first seen,
chained for mutiny, in an actual prison cell below decks, the landscape is figured as
something of a spectacle, for the two internal frames – the openings in his cell –
providing his first view of the landscape remind us of the frame of the film we are
presently watching. He would also remind us of a prisoner in Plato’s cave if not for his
ability to confirm the worldly presence of this spectacle through the sense of touch, as
water from the Atlantic Ocean drips into his cell. Nature, for Smith, is here a kind of
salvation, as he raises his enchained hands, as if in prayer, towards the new world he can
only glimpse through the cracks of his compartment.

Nature’s potential is thus the source of both the film’s optimism and its elegiac
tone. While it is fair to say, then, that characters in Malick’s first three films are
frequently alienated from nature, in The New World alienation is only one of several
possibilities that might emerge from its open-ended presentation of the landscape.
Without too much of an overburdening teleological emphasis, then, we might say that
The New World functions, in part, as an exploration of the sources of the alienation felt in the earlier films, given that they are set in later historical moments.

The film’s variation on the third motif explored in this study, the uncertain journey of one or more characters, is felt at several different levels in The New World. The “journey” most obviously charted is the colonial expansion to America, first figured in an opening credits sequence in which two-dimensional maps spring into three-dimensional depth, cartographically depicting the leveling of trees and the ensuing laboring of workers in founding Jamestown. Like the opening montage of photographs in Days of Heaven, which are taken out of their status as still, finished objects and animated to new life, this credits sequence presents these maps not as the finalized epistemological products of the European colonial regime but as works of the imagination which the film is at pains to show might have been written differently. Curiously, however, for a film “about” the founding of Jamestown and the vanquishing of the Virginian Algonquin, these maps are as close as Malick’s film gets to a direct presentation of the colonial intention to conquer a foreign land. Given the wide array of affects and meanings nature comes to have in relation to the different subjects which inhabit “the new world,” the colonial intention to inscribe onto nature a universal law and meaning is rendered a failed project from the start (although no less devastating in its intentions for that). The birdsong and other flora and fauna heard on the soundtrack as the camera pans and cuts across these various maps in the credits sequence gestures towards the plenitude of nature – the sensuous surplus value – that the rationalism of European cartography fails to fix and define, despite its best efforts. Further, once the narrative proper begins after this
sequence, Malick devotes only a handful of the film’s passages to the colony’s nascent efforts and its subsequent rise and fall. A handful of images show the work of clearing forest and building forts, and Newport’s directives, often presented to us in a voice-over that displaces his presence on-screen, are felt more as just one component of the film’s dense layering of sound rather than the powerful agency that his voice in fact effects in the reality of the film’s diegetic world. Given the scant attention to the laborious human effort of building a colony – labor glimpsed rather than depicted in these fleeting images in the film’s first half-hour – Jamestown is almost felt to “erect itself” off-screen, while Malick gets to the more important business of showing us Smith walking through the space of the Virginia wilderness, the potential of its landscape written in light across his face. This is why, unlike Malick’s previous films, it is difficult to wholly situate The New World as a movement-image structure from out of which develops a time-image; his fourth film is drenched in affect from the start, any linear project of meaning-making and transcendence-through-immanence having yet to be inscribed within its structure.

But in addition to this larger colonial journey – the movements of which are fragmented by Malick’s discontinuous editing and refracted through his impressionistic time-images – we are also given a depiction of two rather more personal and spiritual journeys in the film, that of John Smith and the figure we perhaps mistakenly come to recognize as Pocahontas. I phrase the question of her identity this way because Pocahontas is not named as such in the film (apart from the end credits); the question of her identity is in large part reflected in her ongoing spiritual journey. As Adrian Martin has observed, “What defines this central female character across the film, then, is not the
essence of a single, original, ‘true’ name, but a succession of names….Malick structures the film around a displacement of – and investigation into – personal identity, and the typical cinematic means of signaling that identity.”10 Names are far from an unreflective given in The New World, for naming itself is one of its themes, reflected in moments such as when the Christian moniker “Rebecca” is bestowed upon Pocahontas after her permanent arrival in Jamestown. Malick’s refusal to allow these familiar historical and mythological figures of Pocahontas, John Smith, and “Rebecca,” to cohere as finalized, psychologically knowable subjects means that, like Holly, Linda, and the soldiers of The Thin Red Line before them, they are depicted as undergoing an experience of becoming and change (one which is thrown into relief against the static and oddly xenophobic – given that they are, after all, explorers – consciousness of several of the European settlers). This kind of characterization, no less fragmentary and challenging to perception than the film’s narrative and pictorial scheme, complements the director’s central notion that the history of early America, like the history of World War II in The Thin Red Line, might have been written otherwise.

Perhaps the greatest evidence for this focus on the personal and spiritual becoming of the characters may be gleaned through the very first voice-over Pocahontas is given in The New World. The film’s prologue features the first of many images of flowing water we will see, a recurring visual motif which might be said to generate The New World’s entire filmic flow. In this particular image, the camera slowly follows the ripples in the water, registering on its surface the impressionistic textures of the reflected
light, clouds, and trees. In tandem with this image we hear the first voice-over, spoken by Kilcher’s “Pocahontas”:

    Come, spirit.
    Help us sing the story of our land.
    You are our mother.
    We, your field of corn.
    We rise from out of the soul of you.

Malick’s allusion here is to a Vachel Lindsay poem entitled *Our Mother Pocahontas*. It is worth quoting a passage from that work for comparative purposes:

    John Rolfe is not our ancestor.
    We rise out of the soul of her
    Held in native wonderland,
    While the sun’s rays kissed her hand,
    In the springtime,
    In Virginia,
    Our Mother, Pocahontas.

Lindsay treats Pocahontas’s story as a finished narrative, one through which her identity is essentially knowable (by “us”) and through which we are able to possess it (she is “our mother”). Prior to the verse under discussion (which is the second in the poem), *Our Mother Pocahontas* establishes what are for Lindsay, as for much of American folklore, the primitive, animalistic origins of the title figure: he begins the poem by referencing her father, the Powhatan king, whose “panther-grace bloomed” in his daughter, a motif that
recurs throughout the poem. In the verse quoted above, Lindsay further establishes Pocahontas’ close relationship with the natural realm as well as her importance to American history by negating the centrality of other figures in American ancestry, in this case John Rolfe, while idealizing the “native wonderland” from which she emerged. These motifs are not atypical within the artistic and literary mythology the Pocahontas legend has accrued over the last four hundred years.$^\text{11}$

But the film’s allusion to Our Mother Pocahontas, far from describing Malick’s own attitude, echoes instead Witt’s prelapsarian reverie in the Melanesian landscape in The Thin Red Line, and John Smith’s own idealization of the natives when he first encounters them: “They are gentle, loving, faithful, lacking in all guile and trickery. The words denoting lying, deceit, greed, envy, slander, and forgiveness have never been heard. They have no jealousy, no sense of possession.” Smith, like Lindsay, removes the natives from history by pinning them down to a single essence (although his own regard for them becomes more complicated as his relationship with Pocahontas ensues and his interactions with the natives become more complex). Malick’s film, however, quotes Lindsay so as to displace many of his meanings. By alluding to his poem in a voice-over belonging to Pocahontas, Malick situates her relationship to nature (the “earth mother” she repeatedly seeks throughout the film) as one she possesses and, further, one which is ongoing, part of the “story of our land” which here is only beginning, and which the film will not seek to finalize. And while both poem and film contain a reference to humanity as a “field of corn” sown by a greater spiritual force, in Lindsay’s verse this corn is modern America itself, tautologically seeing its historical image reflected in the mythical
figure of Pocahontas it has itself created. By placing these words in the voice of Pocahontas herself, however, the film works to establish her own purchase on their meaning, reminding us again that we do not fully know, and moreover, can never fully know, the meaning of her life, given that she exists in history more as myth and an object of wish-fulfillment – of which Lindsay’s poem, like the animated Disney feature, is one example – than a knowable subject. Malick’s attempt at poetizing her spiritual search is less an effort to finalize her into another kind of legend as it is an attempt to imagine conditions of experience in which we might see fleeting impressions of what she might have been.

In what follows, I will seek to deepen our sense of how *The New World* performs variations upon these three motifs by placing the film into dialogue with certain relevant strands of philosophy. In the first section of this chapter, I will argue that *The New World* continues Malick’s interest in the self-reflexive possibilities of cinema, or what Cavell terms more broadly as the manner in which “objects participate in the photographic presence of themselves in the re-creation of themselves on film; they are essential in the making of their appearances.” The film’s reflexive consideration of cinematic illusion, I will argue, constitutes its primary relationship to the historical myth it embodies. Obviously, unlike *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, the film contains no explicit reference within its diegesis to cinema, but *The New World*, particularly in its first half-hour, includes a plethora of internal frames, vistas, and stages in which individuals and groups view while others are viewed. This pattern of images reminds us of the fundamental strangeness of each civilization in relation to the other during this first encounter, but also
recalls nothing other than the cinematic site of spectating, thus evoking – in partnership with the film’s salient editing strategies, repeatedly calling our attention to the film as a constructed aesthetic object – the viewing of the film we are presently watching. Malick thus never lets us forget that his narrative has the whiff of fantasy and legend about it; yet, unlike previous cinematic versions of the Pocahontas myth, which ask us to “rush the stage” in accepting their mythical visions as reality as a kind of historical truth, he wants us to reflexively interrogate what it means for this relationship to have been a myth. Indeed, the characters themselves come to reflexively question the fantastic qualities of the myth they are embodying. After Smith leaves the Algonquin settlement, both he and Pocahontas begin to regard their union as something of a dream, the memory of which serves only to fracture the tentative peace between the two cultures and to place them once again as viewing subjects in relation to a viewed other. Further, this viewed other becomes less the object of reality and more the object of a fond memory, one which gradually loses its ontological status in reality as the film proceeds (prompting both characters to ask themselves if, indeed, their love ever actually occurred). The figures in The New World are nothing less than “the objects [that] participate in the photographic presence of themselves,” and the film avows the fantastical nature of the Pocahontas legend through the manner in which its characters regard themselves as something like actors in a dream.

In the second section of this chapter and the conclusion to follow, I will seek to bring my study of the film and Malick’s work as a whole to a close through a closer look at the final hour of the The New World. After their illusion of an intercultural union is
finally felt as only a dream, Smith leaves the colony and Pocahontas is educated as an Anglo-Saxon. John Rolfe, her English husband, works to firmly ensconce Pocahontas as an instrument in European colonial expansion (Rolfe, in Bale’s sensitive performance, is shown to have real doubts about this project, stemming clearly from his love for Pocahontas, although he is never able to actively resists it as Smith does). While Rolfe’s presence inaugurates a movement-image not unlike that enacted by Kit, Bill, and Colonel Tall in the earlier films, Pocahontas continues her own spiritual journey begun in the first half of the film, and thus resists the fixing of her identity in European society and norms. Likewise, *The New World* itself, as my analysis of the final passage in the dissertation’s conclusion will make clear, refuses to master Pocahontas’s spiritual becoming through the movement of narrative form. Instead, its cinematic expression strives for an ethical aesthetic that acknowledges the radical difference Pocahontas as subject posits to our mythmaking. Using Kant’s concept of aesthetic taste in conjunction with our earlier exploration of the self-reflexive qualities of cinema, I will show how the film establishes her “aesthetic otherness,” gently distancing itself from Pocahontas’s experience so as to avoid inscribing her in yet another reactionary myth. I will also conclude the study through my closing comments on *The New World* by exploring once more the value of the concepts I have explored in these pages to the future of film studies and its interdisciplinary points of contact with philosophy.

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However, any introduction to a close analysis of Malick’s reflexive fiction about colonial America would be remiss without an additional précis, this one concerning the multi-
textual nature of *The New World* itself. Malick’s film is mediated not only by its literary, musical, and philosophical references, but also by the contrasts apparent across the three different cuts of the film which have been released over a span of three years. The first, distributed to qualify the film for Oscar consideration in December of 2005, is a 150 minute cut. The second, essentially a shorter cut of this first version, runs at 135 minutes, and is the most widely seen, having been widely released in January of 2006. Finally, in October of 2008 a third, “extended” cut was released on DVD in North America which, in addition to a runtime of 172 minutes, also features chapter titles within the film itself, rendering the director's experiments in narrative fragmentation even more salient. Unlike Malick’s earlier films, which each exist in an authoritative version, the director has not authorized any of these cuts as definitive.

However, one sequence in the three-hour version offers an illustration of the fundamental difference between the earlier cuts and the more recent “extended cut.” There is one particularly moving sequence added in the longest version in which John Smith saves a young Algonquin boy from drowning in a river, shortly after arriving to the natives’ settlement but right before his intimacy with Pocahontas begins. After Smith saves the boy, Malick shows us the natives walking away from Smith to gather around the saved child; as they leave the frame of the image, Smith is isolated, alone, in the middle of the shot, an expanse of water behind him. Immersed waist-high in the water, Smith here finds himself at a liminal point of transition between his earlier mode of being with the colonists – the river behind reminds us of the colony back to which it leads – and a new potential existence with the Algonquin. Then, as if to encourage Smith’s transition
from one kind of life to a new one, some of the natives move back into the frame, as the camera tracks ever so slightly backwards to allow for the arrival of the new figures. We are now reminded less of the European world from which Smith came and more of the new world to which he now might belong. In both the 132- and 150-minute cuts of the film, Smith and Pocahontas nurture a relationship that is frequently felt to be at odds with their given societies, but because of the above addition, in addition to a handful of other extended sequences that spend more time lingering on Smith’s cohabitation with the natives, the 172-minute cut opens up Smith's and Pocahontas's eventual relationship as a social intervention within the Algonquin and European cultures, a cultural ritual welcoming Smith into the fold. In the longest cut is only after saving the native boy and proving himself a worthy member of the Algonquin society that Pocahontas and Smith begin their romance in earnest; in the shorter versions, their romance is felt more as something apart from the rest of the tribe. The loving close-ups through which Malick frames both Farrell and Kilcher during the romance in all three of the versions function more as a depiction of intimacy between two individuals in the two shorter cuts, but in the long version these close-shots, along with the sweeping romanticism of Wagner’s Vorspiel, centrifugally emerge from Malick’s more sustained consideration of the context of the Algonquin society as a whole.

In the extended cut, too, the social nature of their union throws into relief Smith’s return to the struggling English colony, already diseased and near ruin, all the more strongly. This longer cut also includes additional scenes in which other European settlers question Smith’s ability to act as a loyal leader. Although all three versions Malick’s re-
imagine Smith as somewhat resistant to the violence of the colonial project that history otherwise tells us he was as a key agent in enacting, the longest of the three versions explores this notion more extensively. Rolfe, too, emerges as more complex in the longest cut; he is given additional voice-overs communicating to us his spiritual torment over his complicity in inscribing Pocahontas in European law through their marriage (although in all three versions Bale’s sensitive performance is able to suggest an inner disquiet that his character is never able to marshal as an active resistance to the colonial oppression impinging upon the cultural and spiritual identity of the woman he loves).

Although it is important to keep the longest cut’s elaboration of the Smith-Pocahontas relationship and Rolfe character in mind, ultimately the textual multiplicity of The New World is not an impediment to analysis. The very existence of these varied cuts compliments The New World’s own focus on the multivocal, palimpsestic nature of history. The two earlier cuts offer us a more intimate view of the John Smith-Pocahontas relationship; the longer cut opens up that relationship within the frame of Powhatan society itself, and thus imagines each as more complicated figures. In the two sections which follow, then, I will refrain from limiting my comments to any “authoritative text,” since none exists, and will instead treat the three different versions The New World in ways consistent with the film’s own spirit of dialogue and paratactic juxtaposition.

Mapping the New World

Like all of Malick’s films, The New World may be regarded as a historical film that “revisions” history, seeking not an authentic depiction of historiographically verifiable
events (although it certainly includes careful attention to historical detail in areas such as set design and costumes), but rather, as Robert Rosenstone suggests, as a film that eschews standard realist assumptions for “expressive modes of representation that expand the vocabulary of the historian.” As we have seen, for Malick this expressive mode involves the struggles of individual human beings to grapple with the significance of events and to achieve a dialogue with the social and historical world. Malick’s earlier narrators use the cinema – either explicitly, in sequences depicting the viewing of films and other moving images, or implicitly, through the inherent self-reflexive qualities of their voice-overs – as a means to achieve a selfhood that might assuage their isolated mooring in their own subjectivity. (Through these voice-overs they might be said to function as both “co-viewers” and “co-authors” of the films we watch). In viewing cinema, we can recall from Cavell, we are put face-to-face not with an objective, mastered reality (even if particular films purport to give us this), but with the isolated condition of our own subjectivities, and in turn are invited to realize that our subjective desires and fantasies may achieve something like a dialogue with the larger world. The New World, despite its obvious lack of reference to the twentieth-century world of cinema, is no less imbued with motifs of looking and seeing the world through a subjective veil on a poetic level. The film is aware that Pocahontas, and every other Native American represented in the film, is the mythical creation of a Euro-American culture and history which has attempted to understand the first arrival of the colonists onto American land over the course of four hundred years. The achievement of the film is not only to refract the apparent “reality” of this myth through images that are frankly
forthright about their very status as works of the imagination, but also to depict characters
as reflexively conscious of living what may in fact be a myth, both embodying and
projecting onto the American landscape a subjective fantasy that later generations of
schoolchildren will be able to recite from memory as “historical fact.” Indeed, for a film
“about” the relationship between John Smith and Pocahontas, The New World proceeds
through their romance rather quickly, devoting the balance of its running time to the
question of whether or not their love, in socially, personally, and spiritually productive
senses, even actually occurs. The film imagines both characters – but especially John
Smith, a surrogate for the unavoidably complicit gaze of every Western viewer of the
film in the twenty-first century – as not only participants in this illusion but as spectators
of it, inquiring into the reality of the images they remember like the skeptical spectator
seeking to confirm their fantasies in the “reality” unfolding on the celluloid strip.

We might say, then, that in probing into these motifs of seeing and being seen,
and of regarding the past as a dream, The New World wants to find a way to ethically re-
imagine the Pocahontas myth, a way to both sweep itself (and us) up through a frankly
ardent romanticism and at the same time acknowledge that romanticism as a fiction, one
we must feel, sense, and, from our positions as spectators, “live,” but ultimately in order
to critique and redirect. In what I regard as an achievement of this self-conscious
reflexive ardency, Malick’s film recalls what Steven Dillon has called the “Solaris
effect.” Referencing Tarkovsky’s film of the same title, one which echoes Malick’s film
in its combination of a lush, lyrical poetics with lightly modernist self-reflexivity, Dillon
calls for an ethical poetics of contemporary American film, one that frankly
acknowledges the artificial, constructed nature of its images without absconding from emotional, dramatic investments. He draws upon Tarkovsky’s narrative (adapted from Stanislaw Lem’s novel) about the astronaut Kris, who encounters the specter of his dead wife in the form of a hallucination aboard the spaceship Solaris (an entity having certain shared qualities with cinema itself, in particular its ability to “project” through the minds of the subjects it encounters highly authentic embodiments of fantasy). “The relationship between Kris and his dead, perfectly real wife,” Dillon writes, “I take to be the archetypal relationship of audience and screen at the cinema. There is photographic reality, sensual and emotional immersion, but also a concurrent knowledge that the reality is all along an artifice, a constructed hallucination.” While *The New World* may not contain any overt reference to cinema, like *Solaris* it acknowledges its depiction of the John Smith-Pocahontas relationship as a fantasy, and as one with two willing participants who are to some extent aware of the impossible and fantastical nature of their desires and memories. Pocahontas, like John Smith, is both there, in front of us on the cinema screen as embodied by Kilcher in her striking film debut, and yet also not there, the product of four-hundred years of fantasy, wish fulfillment, and poetic allusion. Farrell’s Smith, too, viewing her in ways that frequently frame our perspective as viewers of the drama that he lives, must deal with the fact that the Pocahontas – and the America – he thought he knew may have never actually existed.

*The New World*’s insistence on living and breathing the Pocahontas myth *as if it were* reality, and yet at the same acknowledging the discursive limits of this myth, as it has been known hitherto in history, as a “key” to the truth about the historical experience
of Jamestown, also evokes the work of another thinker. Edgar Morin, like Cavell and Tarkovsky, is fascinated by the play of presence and absence in the illusion we call cinema. But unlike more dour ideological assessments of film that insist we must disavow the fantastical nature of cinema as a dangerous reproduction of reality which masks the artifice producing that “reality” – assessments which began to appear at the time of Morin’s most famous work on film, *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man*, in 1952 – Morin argues that it is only through sensual, emotional, and thoughtful engagements with the “myths” of reality that film gives us can we even begin to critique them. Morin writes near the end of *The Cinema*:

> Of course from the time he appeared on earth, man has alienated his images, fixing them in bone, in ivory, or on the walls of caves. Certainly the cinema belongs to the same family as the cave drawings of Les Eyzies, of Altamira and Lascaux, the scribblings of children, the frescoes of Michelangelo, sacred and profane representations, myths, legends, and literature. *But never so incarnated in the world itself, never so much grappling with natural reality.* That is why we had to wait for the cinema for imaginary processes to be externalized so originally and totally. We can at last ‘visualize our dreams’ because they have cast themselves onto real material [Italics Morin’s].

By visualizing myths and dreams through the concrete material of reality itself, those myths and dreams, as Morin later suggests, “come back upon our waking life to mold it, to teach us how to live or not to live,” functioning as “stored ectoplasms, astral bodies that feed off our persons and feed us, archives of soul. We must try to question them –
that is, to reintegrate the imaginary in the reality of man.” As Morin’s English translator, Lorraine Mortimer, suggests, “the problem is not to live in some pure reality purged of myth, but to recognize and elucidate the imaginary reality of myth and live with myths recognized as myths, having a new relationship with them, possessing them as much as they possess us.” Morin’s ontology, like Cavell’s and Tarkovsky’s call for us to recognize the concrete reality of our myths and dreams when they are consciously displaced into the artificial and dream-like but still awake and reflexive world of film, enriches our understanding of The New World’s own harnessing of the Pocahontas myth. The New World is not a passive transmission of the same tired myth, but rather a re-envisioning, or a counter-mythology precisely because it is a reflexive-mythology, one that inquires into the very status dreams and fantasies play into our own understanding of historical America.

The film begins a concrete exploration of the relationship between myth, dream, and our understanding of historical “reality” through a re-imagining of one of the most instrumental of historiographical objects: the map. The three-dimensional cartography animated in the opening credits sequence has already been mentioned. We might note further that Malick does quite a bit more than merely show us these maps; he makes them strange, panning and tracking across their surface, transforming their two-dimensionality into a more fluid, three-dimensional cinematic depth of space which re-asserts what is mapped as a space alive with phenomenological thickness. But even more relevant here are some of the tantalizing details vibrantly shimmering across this imagined cartography: the flora, fauna, and fish which hover above the topographical surface, as if
floating in the sky; the rivers that we see being drawn on the maps, animated in the film so as to seem as if they were developing into the arteries of some hitherto unknown, self-constituting organism; and the figures and objects which will become familiar to us in the narrative we are about to see (the ships, the Indian by his fire, the colonial workers establishing their colony). These, then, are not simply maps; as imagined by Malick and put to new life within the cinematic, they are something like magical maps, in the end appearing not so much filmed as dreamt. The illusionistic and spectacular, rather than rationalized and instrumental, quality of these images is established not only by certain of their features as mentioned above, but is also grounded in an editing technique that, eschewing the direct cut, fades in and out of blackness as each new fragment of the map appears, like the blinking of eyes about to fall asleep (or eyes which have just awoken). That the first image after this opening credits sequence is of a fish, matching the fish seen hovering above the continent like a cloud in the last of the maps shown to us, suggests the film we are about to see is a continuation of the dreamy topography established in its opening minutes, one frankly forthright about its status as illusion, but an illusion of the kind which asks us to participate in its creative mapping. Like the sinuous tracking shots, the film’s paratactic editing structures, calling for our participation in a kind of conceptual re-mapping, might also be regarded as contrapuntal to the devastating linearity of the colonial project. All of this is to say that The New World is perhaps a dream, but one, in its calling for the activity of the spectator, far from the reactionary dream-cinema postulated by Christian Metz, who would have us dream at the cinema only passively, subject to dreams rather than actively engaging with them.
The larger idea Malick points to here is that cartography embodies many of the same reflexively illusive qualities of the cinema itself. Modern maps, although the product of Enlightenment rationality, have a history that belies these apparently sober origins. In that history we find a kind of non-rational, dream-like magic not at odds with the rational search for objective knowledge, but rather at one with it. “In antiquity,” Christian Jacob has written, “interpreters of dreams were attentive to dreams of flight and images of the earth as seen from space. They decoded the content of nocturnal and aerial visions in an astonishing hermeneutic combination: the meaning of dreams varied according to what the dreamer saw, from landscape and relief to the extent of space encompassed by his or her gaze.” That antiquity’s concern with dreams evokes the aerial visions of modern maps will be strangely familiar to any viewer of The New World. It is the (repressed) dream-like quality of cartography – one of the chief products of the rationality which sought to distance itself from the “primitive” magic of the American native – that The New World brings to the surface within the maps of Jamestown in the opening credits of the film. Following Morin, in Malick’s hands Enlightenment cartography becomes a concrete manifestation of the human desire for perspectival mastery, something of a myth unto itself, one we might inhabit creatively and critically no less than the story of Pocahontas.

Although perhaps the most vivid and memorable, these are not the last maps we see in The New World, and this is not the only time that the film links the rational practice of cartography with the non-rational phenomenon of dreams. A later sequence, appearing in the second hour of the 172-minute cut (and absent from the other two versions), and
after the romance between Smith and Pocahontas has begun to fade, further establishes
the film’s cartographic imagination and its linking of map-making to consciousness.
Important to this second appearance of the motif is the sequence immediately preceding
it. Smith has returned from a second meeting with Pocahontas. After this meeting, Smith
returns to his colony, which is struggling to survive on inhospitable swampland. The
camera tracks from behind as Smith, more purposeful here than in nearly any other
sequence in the film, takes charge of the task of rendering a livable colony. But much of
what we see in these shots also gains distinction through comparisons to his earlier
reverie with Pocahontas. Rather than the circular, to-and-fro movements through an
expansive and untamed wilderness he enjoyed with the Algonquin, Smith moves in a
linear, projective direction, taking charge of the colonial space as its President and
attempting to establish an ethic which might serve to render it equal to the societies of the
neighboring natives. But as Smith takes up the project of colonialism, he himself reminds
his underlings, and us, of the *somewhere else* that seems to guide his intentions:

> Look about you. Everything’s swamp, with water standing in lakes and pools, so
> the ground gives way beneath your feet. I suspect there’s more puddles than dry
> land, each producing more mosquitoes in their slime than there are beads in a
> nunnery, and each mosquito as hungry as a priest. None but a savage could
> inhabit this place. Or west of here, towards the mountains, or south, now that is
> something else. We can sail on, seek a passage to the Indies.

In no other sequence of the film do we see Malick’s Smith more unified by both of the
tendencies which color his behavior at different moments in the film: to establish a
European colony in America, first of all, but one in the image of – not in opposition to – what he mentally mapped out “west,” the “Indies,” during his absence from the colony and his stay with Pocahontas and the Powhatan. (Smith’s words, which “make strange” both the nun and the priest in their association with the undesirable swampland, also speak to a spiritual malaise that begins to encroach upon him more strongly at this moment in the narrative). However, just as Smith invokes this unity, his “Indies” slip away. As Smith speaks in this sequence, a jump cut disrupts the flow of the camera’s movement, resulting in a stuttering rhythm reminding us of the ongoing construction of this filmic and colonial space, the very “map” Smith and his fellow colonists are trying to draw. Smith’s words, too, are reflexively doubled by his own fragmented, interior voice-over – “Like her…always alone,” and “Let the dead bury the dead” – which function here as the aural equivalent of the jump cut, at once drawing us closer to Smith’s emotions and distancing us from it through an unexpected poetic technique. These two whispers, audibly imposed over his diegetic dialogue, suggest his desire for life and his refusal of the stink of death and decay that meet him upon his return to the English colony, preferring instead a social communion with the Algonquin, thus rupturing his forward movement no less than Malick’s editing strategies. But what is also suggested here is his frank acknowledgement that – “always alone” – these utopias of union and peace are merely subjective projections, fantasies that have yet to find any discursive confirmation with the other Europeans, who regard his fondness for the natives with a suspicion that appears ingrained and irreversible.
He has, of course, already established this dialogue with Pocahontas, who shares his view of the landscape; such intersubjectivity, *The New World* suggests, if it had ever really existed in this colonial space, would have drawn the topography of Virginia differently. After the moment described above, maps make their second appearance in the film. As Smith refers to a land he has seen far more beautiful than the swamp in which he is presently mired, a flood of subjective imagery is cued, none of it firmly locatable within the consciousness of a single character, given that this imagery in turn also cues a voice-over of Pocahontas. One of the most striking of these images is a shot of three maps of the Chesapeake Bay that we may fairly infer flow from the pen of Smith himself, given the historical Smith’s own privileged status within the history of colonial cartography. Historiography has shown that Smith’s cartography clearly marked colonial from native land. Norman J.W. Thrower, for example, has pointed out that “On Smith’s map the help of the indigenous population is acknowledged by a series of crosses that separate those areas he had visited from those he had ‘by relation’ with the Indians[.]”  

Here, then, we see an example of Malick’s creative re-visioning of history, and a sense that Smith’s map could have been draw differently: just as this flow of imagery is missing a firm site of demarcation which would separate the memories, cultures, and subjectivities of Smith and Pocahontas, so too these maps – which within the film’s fiction are prototypical versions of the final maps Smith will produce once Virginia is fully “discovered” and Jamestown is firmly settled – are missing the signifying tropes which would firmly demarcate land discovered anew in the name of Christianity from that which has already been claimed by the natives. Via associative accrual in paratactic
juxtaposition with the other images in this montage (which includes not only Smith and Pocahontas but other Algonquin, engaged in their own acts of cultural ritual and magic), something of the dream-quality of antiquity remains in these maps, through which Smith’s desire to build a colony elsewhere than on this infertile swampland finds its geographical, ideological, and spiritual ideal written in the language of cartography.

The map imagery in the film, gesturing towards an America that does not exist but which Smith passionately holds onto for the first half of the film, also echoes the topography of Malick’s own filmic space that, like the director’s other films, refuses the mastering gaze which the modern map would seem to otherwise guarantee. Like the unfinished maps seen in the film, The New World is a careful design, intertextually mediated by centuries of culture, confessing its artificial nature to its viewers frankly and directly and inviting them to participate in its completion (again, it is, in that sense, an ongoing work of artifice and myth, rather than a finished one). In this sense the maps seen in The New World also remind us of the play of presence and absence which, as we have seen, characterizes the cinema itself, as well as Malick’s own creative counter-play with a myth of America’s founding that remains alive in the fantasies of a culture centuries later despite its absence from any verifiable historiography. Tom Conley, who has extensively studied the relation between cartography and cinema, suggests that underneath the apparent finalized mastery a map seems to offer,

a map in a movie begs and baits us to ponder the fact that who we are or whomever we believe ourselves to be depends, whether or not our locus is fixed or moving, on often unconscious perceptions about where we come from and may
be going. To be able to say who one is depends on believing in the illusion that consciousness is in accord with where it is felt in respect at once to itself and to its milieus. Maps in films often enhance that effect when they beguile us into believing that we are naturally in the world and are adequate in respect to the moving images we are processing… We find ourselves immediately undone by the weightless fact that we have no reason to be where we are. The giddy and unsettling effects of watching and studying cinema may indeed have to do with the way the medium brings forward and summons issues of mental geography. It would not be wrong to say that the bilocational effect that maps exert on films prompts us, in either conscious or unconscious ways, to ask if we indeed have any relation whatsoever with being.21

In one obvious way, maps, like films, confirm our presence and being to the world, given that they become the very reflection of our desire for an objective knowledge of the world that goes well beyond the individual. While fulfilling this desire, however, maps also paradoxically occlude it, for this very objectivity the map provides, like the skeptic’s viewing of “a world viewed” at the cinema, affirms only what we would otherwise lack without the map as mental construct, that is, an aerial or god-like reproduction of a metaphysical view which might master everything. And like the creation of the Pocahontas myth, itself a fictional “topography” linking various elements of history into a fantastical mental construct, our subjectivity always intervenes, reminding us that our grasp of a world represented and mastered is, in fact, a fiction, for it misses our presence. Smith’s maps of the Chesapeake in The New World, given that they are unfinished, still
reflect something of his fantasy for a unified new world, one not demarcated by the separation of Christian and native. Yet he is still not quite located there; this union, especially after he leaves Pocahontas for the first time, is consistently felt as an elsewhere. The notion that his illusion might still find discursive confirmation through others is kept alive by Smith at least up until he leaves Jamestown. Certainly, when he confirms to Pocahontas at the end of the narrative, in England, that he never “found his Indies,” we finally regard this utopic map, seen so fleetingly much earlier in the film, as something of a tragically lost project.

If these unfinished maps of the Chesapeake are one sign of Smith’s tenuous grasp on his sustaining illusion of a unified new world, the film as a whole develops patterns of seeing that situate Smith and Pocahontas as spectating surrogates for our own act of watching the film. Character placement in The New World frequently feels less like a design inscribed by its director than a mise-en-scène characters themselves create against the open tableaux of the Virginian landscape. In one early shot in the film, after the first landing of the European ships on the American shore, Malick frames a field of grass in front of an expanse of trees, untouched by human presence. After a beat, first a weapon, and then the colonizer holding it, inscribes itself onto the landscape, followed by two more Europeans who figure themselves within this world for the first time, offering themselves, with some fear, as a vision for the strangers in the landscape to take in. But the natives are no less a spectacle. Later, when the Algonquin first appear to the Europeans, Smith describes them metaphorically, “like a herd of curious deer,” viewing them from afar. In one shot which characterizes in a single instance this repeated pattern
of the gaze onto an Other, Smith stands in the foreground with a few other colonizers while the Algonquin dance in the distant background, figured as a group and not individuated. Kent Jones, in an otherwise appreciative review, chides the film here for the Algonquin’s “resemblance to a performance by an especially earnest and hardworking theater group,” and Amy Taubin makes a similar point when she suggests that it “was probably a mistake to have the actors playing Native Americans trained by an expert in dance ethnography because they move through the forest in the opening scenes as if they were in an Agnes De Mille ballet.” But these metaphors for describing Malick’s poetic choices (and Malick’s own reliance on contemporary performative language to re-imagine the movements of the Native American) share something with Captain Smith’s own relation to this spectacle, for each requires a familiar description to describe and inscribe the unfamiliar. *The New World* makes this idea clear not only in terms of the European relationship to the vision of the Algonquin, but also the Algonquin relationship to the spectacle of the European: In one of the early sequences depicting the first contact between the two cultures, for example, an Algonquin applies his own native language onto a series of objects – the armor, the cigarette, and the canteen of a pair of colonial guards – playfully and to the befuddlement of the two who participate in the spectacle they unwittingly offer up.

Malick’s images of the Native Americans (and the colonizers themselves) thus arrive to us not as an ethnographic document but as a spectacle refracted through centuries of hindsight and cultural allusion. As Manohla Dargis suggested in her review of the film, the natives in the film are “still irrefutably ‘other’; for a filmmaker living 400
years later in another world and different skin, there is no alternative.”^23 If Malick’s own imagining of Pocahontas and the other natives still unavoidably partakes of the same fantasizing as other less reflective cinematic versions of the myth, it is, in a sense, an ethical, interrogative fantasizing, given that Malick maps his own colonial gaze onto the figure of Captain Smith, situating the character as a predecessor to Cavell’s idea of the modern, skeptical gaze more fully embodied in the director’s contemporary-set films. At every turn Smith’s subjectivity, like Malick’s (and our own), intervenes in his vision of the Algonquin and the landscape in which they live.

If Smith’s cartography reflects a desire for cultural and spiritual communion with the natives, the character’s glance and voice-over also imply this idea. As Smith guides an envoi of Europeans towards a first meeting with Pocahontas’ father, the Powhatan king, in a desperate attempt to secure more food through trading, the film glides into a temps mort in which the director – in counterpoint to the fear and apprehension inscribed on the faces of several of Smith’s men – leisurely shows us the cycle of an entire day, from first light to dawn, with images of the Virginian landscape dotted with sunlight peeking through trees and reflecting off the water. These slices of space and time – which form no coherent objective geography and instead exist like the visual and temporal equivalents of fragmented archipelagos or islands^24 – are here mapped only by Smith’s voice-over, which unifies these spliced views through a desire for spiritual and social communion that we see elsewhere in the glimpses of the unfinished cartography the film will later show us:
We shall make a new start. A fresh beginning. Here the blessings of the earth are bestowed upon all. None need grow poor. Here there is good ground for all, and no cost but one’s labor. We shall build a true commonwealth, hard work and self-reliance our virtues. We shall have no landlords to rack us with high rents, or extort the fruit of our labor. No man shall stand above any other but all live under the same law.

No sooner does Smith say this, and we see on the image track contradictions of his statement, immediately fragmenting the union he has worked so hard to imagine and project: the sight of a native in chains, for example, being led as barter to the meeting with the king and, in the next sequence, a violent physical confrontation between Smith and a band of natives, sent by the king who has anticipated his arrival.

Smith’s voice-over, then, like the fragments of subjectivity offered in *The Thin Red Line*, is not quite social discourse. However, it is through this whisper to us, functioning in some respects as the aural equivalent of a direct address, that suggests that Malick’s Smith is faintly aware of his own status as a fictive cinematic creation, aware of his own participation and living of a myth. Through the voice-over quoted above, Smith attempts to bring together the geography of Virginia under the sign of an ideal democracy, and he is equally willing to combine the instrumental rationality driving the colonial project with the sheer fantasy of the non-rational, the same dreaming that lies beneath the desire for cultural expansion and cartographic mapping (and re-mapping). In addition to the desire for an equal form of governance expressed in the voice-over quoted in the previous paragraph, during his leisurely envoi to see the king he also describes to
us his search in the landscape for a new *spiritual* form of life: “Who are you who I so faintly hear? Who urge me ever on? What voice is this that speaks within me? Guides me towards the best? Where? Always the star guiding me…leading me…drawing me on…to the fabled land.” Smith, of course, eventually projects this non-locatable spiritual voice onto the figure of Pocahontas herself, and in doing so Malick shows how the myth he is dramatizing is in large part the product of European fantasy. Yet he also wants to show that at a certain moment in the actual experience of this history, this myth might have had authentic purchase on the meaning of the landscape, for Malick takes Smith’s projection of a democratic fantasy onto the “fabled land” as an earnest attempt to invest the rationalized project of European colonialism with a magic that might have served to put it into true dialogue with the other cultures encountered in the new world.

Smith’s interactions with the natives also offer further evidence for his willingness to participate in the creation of a new society that is equal parts rational *and* magical. While the map which opens Malick’s film suggests the dreams that underlie the rationality of the Enlightenment, it is during this first confrontation with the charges of the Powhatan king, led by Opechancanough (Wes Studi), that we begin to see the non-rational encroach upon Smith’s own engagement with the world. After a violent first confrontation with the Powhatan natives, Smith gives them a compass as a peace offering. He frames this device not as an instrument of European rationality but rather as a magical artifact: “It shows you how the sun chases the night continually across the world,” Smith tells the natives. This line of dialogue directly evokes Smith’s own
historical record (in which he often refers to himself in the third-person), as transcribed by the colonist himself in his *Generall Historie*, with which Malick is obviously familiar:

> He demanding for their Captain, they showed him Opechancanough, King of Pamunkey, to whom he gave a round Ivory double compass Dial. Much they marveled at the playing of the Fly and Needle, which they could see so plainly, and yet not touch it, because of the glass that covered them. But when he demonstrated by that Globe-like Jewel, the roundness of the earth, and skies, the sphere of the Sun, Moon, and Stars, and how the Sun did chase the night round about the world continually; the greatness of the Land and Sea, the diversity of Nations, variety of complexions, and how we were to them Antipodes, and many other such like matters, they all stood amazed with admiration.²⁵

As David Read, analyzing the same passage of Smith’s writing quoted above, points out, Smith here “seems to revel in the magic inherent in a knowledge of the ‘roundness of the earth’ and its ‘greatness,’ ‘diversity,’ and ‘variety,’” even at the same time as he ostensibly distances himself from it.²⁶ But if the historical Smith disavows this magic as he writes himself into history, Malick’s Smith imbibes it as he lives the myth, marshalling the same language used to express his own spiritual search to describe the “magical” workings of the compass he gives to the natives, and the way the compass leads him to regard the sun as an anthropomorphism, “chasing the night continually around the world.” Although the compass is also obviously an instrument of European knowledge, Lloyd Michaels errs, I think, when he suggests that this object’s presence in the film suggests only a “cultural divide,” and an attempt “to civilize ‘savage’ subjects.”²⁷
Instead, in this sequence Malick is clearly showing us that Smith is just as willing as the natives to imbue the object with properties of magic and dream. Malick and his cinematographer, too, share this desire with Smith, for they imbue their own film with an almost magical relationship to the sun, furthering the film’s notion that our subjective fantasies always intercede between our gaze and an objective apprehension of reality. Lubezki, discussing the film’s cinematographic use of natural lighting, does so in strikingly dramaturgical terms, anthropomorphically describing the sun as “a very important character in the film, the most important force in nature, and we wanted to show it in relation to the characters,” a desire that led him and Malick to include a number of lens flares throughout the film, a technique that impressionistically registers the distant object of the sun through a flare on the lens of the camera. These flares remind us that the film camera is itself something like Smith’s magical compass, intervening cinematographically between our view and an objective image of the sun, reminding us of the magic and illusion that might inhere in our experience of nature.

But no other sequence reflects the importance of magic and illusion to *The New World* more than the saving of John Smith by Pocahontas. Historians have been divided over the purported historical reality of the event itself, in which the native princess throws herself on the European explorer just moments after her father, the Powhatan king, orders his death. Smith only wrote about Pocahontas seven years after her death (and, moreover, after she had become a celebrated figure in European discourse about America), leading some to dismiss claims that she had saved him. Others argue that the “saving” of Smith was itself part of a cultural ritual that the Algonquin enacted so as to
welcome Smith into the fold, at least temporarily. It is this last interpretation that seems to convince Malick, for the event is depicted in the film as equal parts illusion and cultural reality. The saving of Smith occurs in one of the few interior locations in the film, the Powhatan king’s hut, shortly after Smith gives the natives the compass. While this structure is lit from above through openings in the hut allowing streams of natural light inside, Malick and Lubezki frequently present this light as if it were artificial, framing several of the images so as to suggest that Smith stands on a theatrical stage which the Algonquin have erected in a ritualistic celebration of his arrival. While Farrell’s performance suggests Smith’s genuine terror, and thus something of the “reality” of this event, the movements of the Algonquin themselves betray that what we see is a carefully staged ritual, which the film continues to understand through the metaphor of the theater: one native stands above Smith, as if in the rafters above a stage, while the king and his charges circle Smith, with the natural light cast down on them like a spotlight. The film also clearly understands this ritual as an illusion to be viewed, for several Algonquin rush inside the hut to take in the spectacle with us. Smith, at a certain juncture, even participates in the illusion himself, amazing the spectators by throwing his gunpowder onto the fire (a “magical” act which parallels his earlier introduction of the compass). Malick also reminds us of the artifice of his own film (at the same time furthering our sense of the diegetic illusion itself) by inserting a series of jump cuts across the movements of several masked Algonquin, who perform a native dance immediately prior to the saving of Smith. These cuts, rather than allowing the images to depict the movements of the natives themselves, generate rhythmic ellipses that result in
a series of shots that appear to animate the natives’ dance, “springing” them to life through a series of jumps in the visual track.

If Malick clearly means for us to understand this event as an illusion, it is no less significant for that. During the ritual, one of the justifications for the sparing of Smith’s life is the idea that he “can teach [Pocahontas] about his land across the waves,” implying that this fantasy might lead to socially productive knowledge, central to Cavell’s notion of the overcoming of skepticism. And certainly their lyrical tryst makes us feel as if it is significant. As Michaels points out, a “montage of close-ups (relatively rare in Malick’s cinema) without any dialogue records the progress of their intense love, consecrated by the surrounding splendor of nature,” but no sooner does this romance ends, the question of its potentially illusive nature begins. Throughout the second half of the film, both Smith and Pocahontas question the reality of the love they have experienced. During their second meeting – a short interlude during one of Smith’s envois with native traders – Pocahontas speaks in a fragmented voice-over paired on the visual track with images of her and Smith enjoying each other’s presence in the wilderness: “True…shut your eyes. Is this the man I loved…there…so long? A ghost. Come. Where are you, my love?” One of the most acousmatic properties of the film is that Pocahontas begins speaking English in her voice-over before she learns any substantial portion of the language within the diegesis, and certainly that rupture is felt to no greater effect than in this sequence. Her voice, owing to the fact that it does not temporally match with the images we see, suggests that Pocahontas herself is not so much a participant in as a spectator of these images; her subjectivity intervenes as a crucial component in assessing the truth of these
images. Yet like Smith’s maps, the possibility remains that they reflect only her own desire, rather than any viable historical reality.

This viability is shattered with devastating finality in the sequences leading to Smith’s departure from the colony. The Powhatan king discovers that Pocahontas has shared with Smith a secret crop that will allow the Europeans to subsist on the land (a revelation more clearly conveyed in the three-hour version), leading to a full-scale battle between the Algonquin and the Europeans outside the front of a fort, a conflict in which Pocahontas’ brother is killed and any hope of a union between European and Algonquin becomes now impossible to imagine. When Smith and Pocahontas meet secretly at dusk over a fire, free from the gaze of both the other colonists and the Pocahontas’s father, she invites him to run away with her. But Smith, having now given up most of his resistance to the now brutal colonial project that he was once so intent on investing with true ethical and democratic value, makes clear that, by this point, no map can possibly create the topography that might accurately reflect the peaceful union either desires: “Where would we live? In the woods? On a tree top? A hole in the ground?” At this juncture, Smith has only one more fantasy and, ironically, it is the only one he succeeds in fulfilling: to have Pocahontas falsely informed of his death at sea, so that he may return to Europe as an instrument of colonialism without his former love reminding him of brutally vanquished possibilities of cultural reconciliation. An image immediately following their final meeting by fire, in which Pocahontas is figured in long-shot against an expanse of leveled trees which have served as the wood used to build the European colony, prefigures what Smith later recognizes all too clearly: the impossibility of reconciling the cartographic,
colonial gaze and its destruction of the landscape it seeks to master with the dream that it might have been otherwise.

“Why Does the World Have Colors?”

As the final stretch of my commentary on The New World unfolds across the remaining pages of this chapter and the conclusion, I will turn my attention primarily to the depiction of Pocahontas’s experience in the final hour of the film, exploring her struggle with the colonial attempt to discipline and determine her identity after Smith returns to Europe. In doing so, I also seek to draw this project as a whole to its conclusion. Given the degree to which the film acts as both a summation and intensification of certain of Malick’s themes, it also provides ground for considering how the concepts animating this study might be used in the future of both the discipline of film studies and its potential interdisciplinary contacts with philosophy. One of the goals of my work has been to illustrate how close, critical analyses of films may be put into dialogue with the concepts that we bring, from the history of philosophy and film theory, to our experiences of those films. In positing this encounter as a dialogue, I have sought to go beyond situating theoretical and philosophical texts as merely illustrative of filmic themes, having instead sought a method for considering the way film itself may potentially intervene in our understanding of its history as a material, aesthetic object and in our own histories as thinkers concerned with film. Even if it may be that Malick’s films at times transcend their historical moment insofar as they ask us to engage with concepts generated outside of the historical frame of their production, they also dialectically return us, with those
concepts in tow, to their own history, pressuring us to inflect and even refigure our concepts in relation to a concrete form of cinematic practice and, in the case of Malick’s films, the historical experiences they fictionalize.

But as these final pages will also hopefully drive home, I have also sought something else: the rehabilitation and redirection of the aesthetic within contemporary film and media studies. Given this project’s parameters, I have been concerned, of course, with concepts of the aesthetic as they emerge from the work of certain philosophers, but also with “aesthetic” as it is more prosaically known in the realm of work on cinema, that is, with form, style, and theme, and with the way style, in Malick’s work, often serves to inflect and de-stabilize our understanding of narrative form, rather than merely serving as a vehicle for a transparently told story and message. To be sure, my critical work, which has striven for an awareness of its own procedures just as Malick’s films spark an awareness of their filmic constitution, has been no naïve or innocent act of inscription; Malick’s images and sounds have been re-authored through my own (hopefully open-ended) critical voice as inscribed in the preceding pages. I suspect there is something in my experience of them that is, if not always exactly shared, at least intersects with the viewings of other critical spectators. Thus it has been one of the goals of this project to successfully describe, evoke, and explore Malick’s work not simply for its own sake, but also for the meaning such experiences accrue as we intervene in the critical and theoretical ways through which we as an informed audience might understand them. In attempting to achieve an “authoring” of my own experience of Malick’s work, and by extension a re-authoring of certain film-theoretical and
philosophical concepts, I have thus sought something more than an autobiography of my own experiences, or a simple description of films. I have instead been interested in the way Malick’s films are a privileged example of the dialogic potential of cinematic aesthetics, wherein viewers, characters, filmmakers, and camera can occupy different nodes on a line of experience. Given that both phenomenology and evaluative criticism flirt so dangerously with solipsism – one through a focus on the experience of the individual self, the other with propositions that, if not theoretically informed, have the potential to become mere opinions – the critic's authoritative work also has to be dialogical. In other words, it has to be marked by a self-conscious consideration of difference, and, for me, has to understand its authority as answerable to the difference which other perceiving selves introduce into both critical and theoretical reflection.

Relative to this focus on the critic's experience, Vivian Sobchack's work helped me frame the film itself as a site of that difference: in part, through the experiences of characters, who perform their own intentional projects in space and across time and thus have the potential to see the world differently than we do (not all films ask us to identify ourselves with characters). Also important, as Sobchack has suggested, is the difference of the film itself as a perceptual “agent.” Sobchack's work sometimes flirts with science fiction in its establishment of the film camera as an autonomous perceiving agent; she did, after all, write a seminal text on the history of sci-fi cinema in the 1980s. Ultimately, however, her work suggests that the anthropomorphism of cinema derives from the spectator's desire to understand difference in an aesthetic way. In other words, her phenomenology is not as anthropomorphic as it first sounds; if film parallels my way of
seeing in some respects (in ways that Münsterberg suggested almost one hundred years ago), it ultimately sees differently than I can, going places where I cannot, framing things sharply whereas my own vision recedes less abruptly. Because of perceptual difference, we cannot master films theoretically, Sobchack implies. Films participate dialogically with our understanding of them, forcing us to re-encounter the concepts we bring to the experience relative to the various perspectives they introduce. This becomes important in a number of Malick's films relative to gender (i.e., the characters of Holly and Linda in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, respectively) and history (in *The Thin Red Line*, no historical truth of World War II is ever established, for each soldier “fights his own war” – the tagline to the film’s movie poster unwittingly got it right).

Films, of course, don't always deal with difference. Many films try to master experiences no less rigidly than certain cognitive historians and theorists. (As Tom Gunning has perspicuously shown, Fritz Lang's films might be read as an allegory for this desire for “cinematic power.”) Standardized cinema regulates and disciplines perception; what I have come to consider “philosophical cinema,” on the other hand, pressures us to think through and with the filmic object, rather than passively subject ourselves to the regulations and standardizations inherent in certain forms of cultural practice. This kind of aesthetic resistance – at once sensual and ethical – also resists the institutionalized, and no less standardized, regulation of spectator perception familiar in certain influential corners of film studies, which would seek to establish a cognitively universal spectator who is merely “cued” by the form and style of particular films as manifest at different moments in history. For such scholars, the films which “cue” us
change and become, but viewers do not. Critical writing that works outside the realm of a strictly cognitive poetics always implies a contingent spectatorship, and films such as Malick’s, I have argued, welcome the participation of that spectatorship through a form and style that calls upon us to productively trouble the conceptual armature we bring to the concrete experience of watching these films, those concepts through which we understand the filmic.

In bringing this summary of this project’s central ideas closer to *The New World*, my aim is to suggest how we can continue to use the ideas which have grounded this study in the future of film studies (and in future interdisciplinary work on film and philosophy). While all of Malick’s films refuse the transparent perceptual mastery frequently resulting from the standardization of classical cinema, *The New World* in particular aligns this cinematic refusal of the standardization and regulation of perception with a story that thematizes the way such perceptual standardization functions as a salient form of oppression.

After the romance between Smith and Pocahontas is irrecoverably broken by violent conflict between the Europeans and the natives, leading to the killing of Pocahontas’s brother, Smith is notified of a potential trade that might occur between the natives and the colonists: Pocahontas in exchange for a copper kettle. “She and her lot are on the verge of killing us all,” a colonist tells Smith, pleading him to overcome his ethical objections to a trade which might bring peace to the two colonies. In effect, this refusal to barter for Pocahontas’s life is Smith’s last act of resistance; soon, his power is usurped. As Malick presents it in the extended cut, it soon becomes clear that no such offer for a
trade existed. Instead, with Smith again held in chains, the other colonists use the occasion of a trade to kidnap Pocahontas and bring her back to the colony. (History tells us that Pocahontas was raped during this kidnapping; Malick, true to form in his patented avoidance of graphic carnality, does not show us this, although he does emphasize the objectifying gaze of the colonists, who gaze at Pocahontas and follow her with both eyes and body as she makes her first uncertain movements in the colony). Following this “trade,” the natives retaliate with violence; the colonists, in turn, burn and pillage native settlements. As Smith suspected, this trade leads not towards peace, but further cultural tension.

If Malick avoids a frank depiction of colonial sexual aggression, The New World does show us the violence inherent in the attempt at regulating and standardizing Pocahontas’s perception. The filmmaker makes clear what the Europeans are attempting to master by focusing in a detailed manner on Pocahontas’s sensual engagement with the contours of Jamestown shortly after her arrival at the colony. Thrown into a new order of social experience, objects that are familiar to us become strange to Pocahontas. After being shown to her living quarters, we first see her look up at a shaft of light in the ceiling (perhaps recalling the more natural shafts of light the film repeatedly emphasized during its presentation of the earlier romance), then caress the contours of a bounded book, which she marvels at as a material object, and then run her palm through an open flame, tamed by a candle but still retaining the spark of the unbridled wilderness with which she is more familiar. The recurring stylistic choices in all of these images are medium and close-up shots, and in his eschewal of an establishing shot, Malick refuses to
“situate” Pocahontas within the landscape of Jamestown as the colonists themselves will attempt to do. Instead, the director more frames more intimately Pocahontas’s own engagement with particular objects and sights that strike her as every bit “other” as they are familiar to her European hosts.

Her uncertain engagement with space in this sequence is developed further over a series of scenes prior to her marriage to John Rolfe. Despite later sequences which show us the colonial attempt to craft for her a new identity (“Rebecca,” who wears European garb and covers her Algonquin tattoos with the hem of a skirt), The New World elsewhere suggests that her ongoing spiritual becoming has not ceased, and that it offers a source of limited resistance to the European mode of becoming she is forced to otherwise adopt as the film draws to a close. In the first sequences depicting her permanent arrival at Jamestown, Malick is careful to show how Pocahontas both protects and preserves her own autonomous development of identity by refusing to move through colonial space when that space becomes threatening. At first isolated in her living quarters, exploring the textures of these European objects placed around her (a mise-en-scène she has no agency in designing), she soon makes to leave for the exterior space of the fort. As she moves to leave her quarters, however, Malick lingers on a gesture that in most narrative films would mark the transition from one shot to another: the opening of a door. Doors (and other kinds of openings between and onto other spaces), more than any other figures in standardized cinema, cue both the movement of figures and the advancement of plot through the revelation of the new knowledge that lies behind the door. Working from
ideas implicit in the film criticism of Serge Daney, Joe McElhaney has inquired into the meaning of the door in standardized cinema, writing that

Classical cinema creates a world in which our primary desire is always to know more and see more, not simply as apart of the inevitable process of a cause-and-effect narrative unfolding, but also in terms of the organization of the images themselves. Behind every image in classical cinema is another image and another, each of them linked in what Deleuze (in writing on Daney) has described as a ‘powerful beautifying organic totality.’ Hence the importance in classical cinema of continuity editing strategies that fluidly link spaces together….The door (along with the picture frame, the window, and the mirror) supplies this desire for controlling and containing the image, directing the eye back toward the power of the single shot even if the entire rhythmic structure of classical cinema…compels the senses to move on.32

This particular door through which Pocahontas might move leads from an inside to an outside with which she is hitherto familiar only through the illusions she has fostered in her earlier romance with Smith. But Malick does not reduce either the door or Pocahontas to a figure which would advance his own mastery of narrative form and place Pocahontas into a system of exchange that she does not desire or understand; instead, he establishes her difference via her refusal to move through the door (and thus to inscribe herself in the cultural knowledge to which it leads). As the sequence goes on to show us, this response results from a complex entanglement of memory and power. As Pocahontas is about to leave the room (and the sound of this door slowly creaking on the soundtrack emphasizes
the process of opening it, rather than hiding it through the abstraction of a cut, she looks to her right, across from the door, and through a window, in which she and we see the figure of a colonist staring back at her. After this, two images – subjective impressions from her memory – appear: First, from a high, subjective angle, a foot stepping into a pond (we assume it is her own); and, second, the caress of a hand on her shoulder, framed in medium shot (we assume it is Smith touching her here, but he is not shown, figuring him as a ghostly absence in her memory). Clearly, no simple movement through this door will result in the kind of causal agency possessed by characters moving through doors in standardized cinema. Pocahontas is too burdened both by the threatening gaze of an unwelcoming other and a memory of a cultural connection that may, in fact, may have been a lie. At this point, Malick’s film clearly wants us to consider the possibility that the shaft of light written across Pocahontas’s face as she holds this door tentatively open might be the “light” of the rational Enlightenment and its knowledge, which would seek to welcome Pocahontas and other natives into its arms but only through their oppression. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, she shuts the door, refusing to effect a causal transition to what in classical cinema would be the next scene, another node in an ongoing chain of (Anglo-Saxon) knowledge. Malick’s camera respects this choice, following her back into her living quarters where she lies down for sleep, understandably exhausted.

This sequence crystallizes many of the film’s tendencies in its last act. While most of the film’s first ninety minutes has emphasized an open-ended, dynamic movement through nature, much of its last hour – particularly in the temps morts which figure prominently in the extended cut – suggests stasis, primarily through Pocahontas’s
inability, on her own terms, to freely explore space and become in time. Before Smith leaves the colony permanently, he instructs another colonist to tell Pocahontas that he has died at sea, with the hope that she will eventually move beyond a romance that may have indeed been an illusion. Pocahontas responds to his death with tragic solemn; as in the collapse of explanatory frameworks characters are made to feel in *The Thin Red Line*, Pocahontas is existentially affected by the collapse of her key explanatory myth. In a series of sequences that depict her melancholy, Pocahontas wanders the landscape of Jamestown, searching again for an identity that has been thrown into flux with Smith’s departure: “Come, death. Take me. Set me free. Let me be what I was.” This wandering effectively pause her inscription into the European regime, and reinscribe her relationship to nature, as she absconds from Jamestown and begins to pray to the earth mother she first intoned in the film’s very first voice-over. One additional sequence in the three-hour cut illustrates the nature of Pocahontas’s spiritual renewal after Smith’s “death.” After returning to the colony after an extended sojourn into the woods, Pocahontas encounters an unnamed Algonquin, who has wandered onto the European settlement. Earlier in the film, Smith referred to this native as a madman, and his behavior is clearly shown as existing outside both European forms of rationality and Algonquin social codes. But here Pocahontas identifies with him, following his strange movements with fascination and seeing in his “madness” – which Malick presents to us only as a child-like joy in simple objects, movements, and natural phenomenon – a possible escape from her inscription in the colony’s instrumental progress and its stifling of her own becoming.
As Malick depicts it, Pocahontas’s subsequent relationship with Rolfe is certainly human and tender, and we vividly get the sense of a woman attempting to reconstruct her life after the collapse of one of her explanatory myths. But for all of its apparent love, her romance with Rolfe is clearly also the inverse of her relationship with Smith. We might recall that, during his first point of contact with the Algonquin, Smith was given to idealizing, describing in voice-over the natives as innocents outside of history in the same manner as Witt perceives the Melanesians in *The Thin Red Line*. Yet Smith’s notion was belied in his experience with Pocahontas, which was felt as a shared myth and becoming; if it was a fiction, it was a potentially productive one socially and culturally because it was an intersubjective illusion, shared with the figure of Pocahontas and inscribed in Algonquin society. No shared myth defines the relationship of Pocahontas and Rolfe: while sharing several tender moments (which are modest in contrast to the ardent passion which characterized the earlier romantic scenes involving Smith), they each ascribe significance to their relationship in separate ways. Rolfe, watching Pocahontas from behind as the two walk through a field of grass, himself confesses this to us in voice-over: “Who are you? What do you dream of?” He admits here that he has no intersubjective connection to Pocahontas’s desires and fantasies, even though the film itself shows her spiritual search as ongoing even during this moment of her inscription into Anglo-Saxon law and custom through her marriage to Rolfe. In the extended cut, especially, Rolfe’s first encounters with Pocahontas are framed less as the multiperspectival, open-ended courtship of her earlier romance with Smith, and more as a one-directional pursuit in which Rolfe figures as looking agent and Pocahontas figures as
object pursued. A sequence in the extended cut in which Rolfe meets with Newport and other European officials suggests something of what we know from history: that his relationship with Pocahontas was, beyond its personal meaning for the participants, an instrument for disciplining the Native American’s “otherness” within the discursive norms of colonial society. Although Rolfe’s voice-over will soon appear, suggesting an interiority that is at times in sharp conflict with the instrumental role he serves in the colonial project, his outward gaze and behavior, while clearly loving, shows none of the active resistance Smith exuded.

More than a lover, in fact, Rolfe is figured as an educator of Pocahontas, and thus an agent moving forward the plot of colonial progress (as well as the plot of the film itself). One sequence makes this particularly clear. A genteel Englishwoman, Mary (Janine Duvitski) has been charged with the task of educating Pocahontas in the basics of Anglo-Saxon femininity and dress. Part of this education is clearly designed to make her forget Smith. As Mary tells us as Malick presents a montage of images representing Pocahontas’s education, “Think of a tree, how it grows ‘round its wounds. If a branch breaks off, it don’t stop, but keeps reaching towards the light. We must meet misfortune boldly and not suffer it to frighten us. We must act the play out and live our troubles down, m’lady.” As Mary calls for Pocahontas to inscribe herself into the narrative of the Anglo-Saxon “play” to which she refers here, Pocahontas – acting as Mary’s genteel “lady” should – opens the door to her room for Rolfe. She does not walk through it, but he does, effectively establishing Rolfe as the causal agent in both the film’s narrative and the Native American’s cultural assimilation. He proceeds to educate her in the English
language, yet Pocahontas stops him short, asking a question that is profound in its apparent naivety: “Why does the world have colors?” Here the film marks some distance from its presentation of the female characters in Malick’s first two films, who were frequently figured as either naïve or lacking in adult knowledge; in contrast, Malick’s camera at this moment moves in for a close-up (relatively rare in his early work) as if to identify with the subject asking the question. Pocahontas’s question (which stops Rolfe short) suggests not only her own resistance to an education that would strip her of any potential of her own becoming, but also the film’s own aesthetic resistance to certain forms of institutionalized and standardized forms of cinematic perception.

Pocahontas’s question about color begins to suggest how the concepts which have animated this study may be productively extended past its pages and into the future. It is not an innocent question, for her insistence on color resists the rigid form of Rolfe’s instruction. Brian Price, who has written on the aesthetic and ideological effects of color in the cinema, suggests the following, which suggestively intersects with the sequence from *The New World* presently under discussion:

> The pleasure of an art object is thus owned to the perceptual certainty and formal mastery of the pictorial field. By contrast, color disrupts order: it promises to undo the Gestalt effected by line and form. The closer we look at color, the less legible forms become, the less able we are to comprehend the narrative and its moral message. Color thus defies the goal of Aristotle’s *Poetics*: to establish narratives that effectively convey moral lessons and that purge society of
emotions and impulses deemed hazardous to the healthy functioning of the republic.33

The moral overtones of Aristotle rely upon line and form to bestow upon color the uniform perceptual organization, a move necessary for any monological moral discourse. But Price reminds us that color can “threaten the perceptual clarity afforded by line,” opening a path towards understanding how “language becomes a way of regulating perception. When we refer to an object as blue, for example, [we are] ultimately quieting the multiple aspects of the object, forestalling the noise of other perceivers who might see it differently, noise that might, in the end, better reflect the complexity of the object itself.”34 It is not only Pocahontas, however, who by disrupting Rolfe’s attempt at instruction opens our eyes to the inherently contingent qualities of color, but also Malick himself, who anticipates her question about color. As Mary speaks in a moral discourse that echoes Aristotle – impelling Pocahontas to be more like a tree and keep “reaching towards the light,” so that she may “act the play out” – The New World, through a non-diegetic insert, cuts away from the site of her instruction and back to the natural world. We see a shot of tree, the lines of its branches and trunk reaching towards the sky. To this extent the image might be seen to illustrate Mary’s moral meaning. But at the same time the shot also clearly exceeds her pedagogy, for the lines of the tree are partially occluded by the light reflecting off of the multicolored leaves which, moreover, do not form a line in any single direction, but are cast about in the wind. Malick’s impressionistic imagery, although accounting for the relative permanence of this tree’s grand line and form, is equally, if not moreso, fascinated by the color and light available at a particular time of
day, a quality which Mary’s and Rolfe’s rationalistic discourse cannot fully fix and define. Malick, to a certain extent, identifies with Pocahontas here, echoing her honest question with an image that illustrates the limited and culturally relative nature of Mary’s discourse. As with the depiction of the locust swarm in *Days of Heaven*, Malick refuses to identify his images here with a moralistic discourse, preferring instead to establish a perspectival difference within the fictional world of the film.

But Malick’s ultimate “lesson,” if not moral, is perhaps ethical, for he ends his film by once again inscribing a distance between the film and the character at the end of *The New World*. It is here that we can begin to suggest what Malick, and some of the ideas in this study, may potentially offer to the future of cinema studies. Rolfe’s agency brings Pocahontas to England, where she has her final meeting with John Smith, who has just returned from a failed expedition. Prior to their last encounter, Malick frames Smith, in an extreme long-shot, as a rigid part of the cultivated English garden through which he walks, flanked on either side by a row of symmetrically placed and delicately sheared trees. More vibrant than the green color of the trees themselves is the uniform line they form in the landscape, echoing in architectural terms the normative discourse of both Mary and Rolfe in the earlier sequence. By this point in the film we might again remember that Smith’s romance with Pocahontas offered him the opportunity to re-figure European modes of thinking and being rather than merely subject the Algonquin natives to those modes. But as we know by this time in the film, that potential was an illusion whose significance Smith failed to grasp, defeated by the four-hundred years of history which tells us that, in fact, the Europeans did not accept such a radical, dialogical project,
and instead committed brutal acts of genocidal violence in the construction of their new world. The film always reminds us: yes, this could have been. We might even be able to feel what it could have been: the film is an elegy. But of course, it was not that – a genocide ensued – and to suggest otherwise is ethically irresponsible. Appropriately, in this image we do not get a sense of him walking through and experiencing this landscape (which we got so much of in the first hour during his time in Virginia); in fact, this landscape, at least for European society, does not exist for that purpose. He is merely another of its figures here, fully disciplined and ensconced within Anglo-Saxon society when he previously resisted its colonial brutality.

But Pocahontas engages within the landscape differently than Smith in the stirring final passage of this film. Here she comes to encounter the cultivated English landscape as another site to be explored, investigated, lived, as lines and forms to be dissolved in the more open-ended, dialogical experience of color and impressions (and touch and smell). Accordingly, Malick does not frame her in such an enclosed manner as Smith. In her final appearance of the film she is instead playing hide-and-seek with her child, fathered by Rolfe. It is a child-like behavior in the best way (no, Malick is not suggesting Pocahontas is a primitive here: there is something more sophisticated in her play, and her movements in this landscape are freer than Smith’s). She whispers to her son; she will be soon dead, of a virus contracted in England, but there is something about this play in the garden that gestures more productively towards the future. If Smith has given up his search for meaning (his Indies, he has told her, “may have passed him by”), for Pocahontas this search continues, and rapturously so. She will not be fixed by what
attempts to fix her. She resists, and finds the spiritual “earth mother” she has sought for
the duration of the film. The ethical implications of this resistance will be explored
further in the conclusion to follow, for they offer us a way to conclude our study of
Malick’s work as a whole and to suggest possible future directions in the interdisciplinary
contact between aesthetics and film studies.

1 Lloyd Michaels, *Terrence Malick* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 96. It now
looks unlikely, however, that *The New World* will be Malick’s final film; as of this writing, he is filming
*Tree of Life* in Texas.

Press, 2007), 200.


4 See David Bordwell, *The Way that Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley:


6 James Morrison discusses this shift in Malick’s poetics with *The Thin Red Line* in *The Films of Terrence


9 B. Benjamin, “Uncharted Emotions,” 51.

10 Adrian Martin, “Approaching the New World,” in *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of
America, Second Edition,* 212.

11 For an examination of these works from an historical perspective, see Robert S. Tilton, *Pocahontas: The

1979), xvi.

13 Robert Rosenstone, ed., “Introduction,” in *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*
(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3-13. I have also been guided by Robert Burgoyne’s


16 Edgar Morin, *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man*, 218.


24 I borrow the use of this metaphor in this context from Tom Conley, who uses it productively to describe the idea of an “image fact” in *Cartographic Cinema*, 9.


26 David Read, *New World, Known World*, 27.


29 These competing historical interpretations are explored at greater length in J.A. Leo Lemay, *Did Pocahontas Save Captain John Smith?* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1992).

30 Lloyd Michaels, *Terrence Malick*, 93.


34 Brian Price, “Color, the Formless, and Cinematic Eros,” 79.
CONCLUSION

This study’s analysis of style and narrative form has sought to trouble the distinction film scholars usually draw between those two terms, but I have been equally interested in troubling the dichotomy between “analysis” and “impressions,” instead preferring that the two engage in a kind of dialectic. It seems appropriate, then, that I conclude this study with some final thoughts about the final sequence of *The New World* – thoughts which are, importantly, impressions of mine. They cannot be but impressions, because I find that I am stopped short by this sublime final passage of Malick’s fourth film, and I suspect Malick intends for such cognitive dissociation. Frankly, I am not sure what this *rapture* that the film itself expresses here – it is the most lyrical passage in a film of lyrical passages, scored to Wagner’s *Vorspiel*, appearing for the third time – actually means. Or, more precisely and in other words, what it means to Pocahontas, that perceiving agent who marks a difference relative to both us and the film itself. She is, I think, keeping that meaning secret: in one startling moment, she whispers something to her son, but the soundtrack’s exclusion of this whisper, as well as the film’s visual framing of the moment in a long shot, lets us know clearly that whatever exchange is happening here, it is not for our ears. What we do hear is Rolfe, who speaks to us in voice-over on the soundtrack as these final images of Pocahontas are shown to us; he reads the letter she has left for their son before her death, and in doing so marks the first of many Anglo-Saxons who will act as her voice throughout history. Malick is perhaps the only in this lineage who disavows his ability to know, exactly, what spiritual epiphany Pocahontas has found in this well-tended English landscape, or in other words,
what the identity she finds at the end of her long spiritual becoming is. We cannot know it, the film suggests, because four hundred years of genocide and unethical myth-making separate us from this figure who is animated but not explained in the final frames of *The New World*. If Malick is establishing Pocahontas as an “authentic” historical figure here, it is only in emotional, not in discursive, terms. In every significant and signifying way, Malick respects the radical difference of her experience; instead of mythologizing her yet again, instead of letting the camera and his formal narrative structure *master* her experience – cinematic equivalents of the kind of regulation and standardization of perception which both Mary and Rolfe for their parts attempt to accomplish within the diegesis – Malick lets her possess the myth that has too often possessed her in cultural history (as she has throughout the film, given her awareness of the potentially illusive nature of her relationship with Smith). What it all “means” gets washed away with the final chords of Wagner (who, as we know from his passionate but also tortured and conceptually convoluted writing, was himself never very good at articulating the meaning of his sublime music).

Malick’s respect of perceptual and existential difference in this final sequence demarcates a site in which one final dialogue with a philosophical concept can occur: the Kantian notion of the aesthetic, and its inherent respect for perceptual difference. Cultural studies (which, in many institutions, is becoming the home of film and media studies) is indebted to Kant, who was in many ways the first significant thinker to suggest that the “world” is in fact significantly a relative construction of the perceiving human subject. As Melinda Szaloky has put it, “Kant’s synthesis of the empiricist and rationalist
philosophical traditions through a ‘transcendental idealism’ makes room for both a separate physical reality – approachable but never fully recoverable through the senses – and a world-making mind, which imposes its nature-given patterns and concerns upon the world of objects.”¹ As The New World has dramatically shown, the construction of mental worlds can become oppressive and even violent when one mental world, and its own privileged relationship to the physical realm, is imposed on another monologically, subjecting others to unwelcomed forms of becoming. However, for Kant, an aesthetic object has the power to disrupt such monologism, via his conception of aesthetic taste, which drives us into the social world of dialogical discourse.

Kant tells us that when we find a work of art beautiful, we are compelled to wield our historically and personally available conceptual armature in order to defend our evaluation, to persuade others than the object is of significance. However, after we find it is impossible to convince everyone, we ultimately also discover that we cannot – except by force – ever expect everyone to accept our evaluation. In watching films, too, we remain separate from the world, unsure if what we value through the watching of films will ever find discursive resonance, or if it is doomed to remain within the sphere of fantasy. Stanley Cavell, who has put his concept of modern skepticism into productive dialogue with this aspect of the Kantian aesthetic, has suggested that aesthetic taste, and the criticism which follows it, is moved by “a kind of compulsion to share a pleasure, hence tinged with an anxiety that the claim stands to be rebuked. It is a condition of, or threat to, that relation to things called aesthetic, that something I know and cannot make intelligible stands to be lost to me.”² Cavell frames the problem further:
...Kant’s location of the aesthetic judgment, as claiming to record the presence of pleasure without a concept, makes room for a particular form of criticism, one capable of supplying the concepts which, after the fact of pleasure, articulate the grounds of this experience in particular objects. The work of such criticism is to reveal its object as having yet to achieve its due effect. Something there, despite being fully open to the senses, has been missed.³

In ways that echo the foundation of this study, for both Kant and Cavell, the experience of an aesthetic object is always an experience past: after the film has run through the projector – indeed, perhaps after film itself has run its course as a cultural object – we are still nevertheless convinced that there was something there, and that it is still significant. We are thus driven to write and to talk about it and convince others. Part of the work of overcoming skepticism and isolation occurs in the dialogical reach that would seek to bring filmic experience into the social, discursive world. This study has attempted to bring Malick’s work into the light of such discourse, and thus to refract a number of discourses through Malick’s films, just as his films dramatize the becoming subject’s attempt to confront a personal and social history that is frequently sent into motion through their encounters with cinema (either explicitly or implicitly).

This is, admittedly, a rather cursory summary of one of the most fundamental ideas in Kant’s third critique (although Cavell helps us bring the concept within the philosophical parameters of this study). A separate study would itself have to be devoted to the question of exploring how Kant’s concepts, as Szaloky also points out, are already (unconsciously) at work within film studies.⁴ Kant, however, helps us get to the ethical
aesthetic that I think Malick achieves at the end of The New World. James Schamus, the producer and co-writer of Ang Lee’s Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, and something of a theorist in his own right, has brought Kant into film studies this way:

Learning to live with one’s own aesthetic ‘otherness’ is at the core of the ethics of aesthetic experience; aesthetic judgment takes the objective form of something that is ‘universally communicable,’ but such communication can never be universally enforceable (although structures of hegemony and the architecture of power often provides pathways of least resistance to the assumption of ‘global’ tastes). The experience of aesthetic judgment confirms our ‘difference’ even as, in its very form (its iterability, as Jacques Derrida might say), it asks us to assume a ‘sensus communis,’ a common sense without which the aesthetic experience itself would be unthinkable.5

In the final sequence of The New World, I want to suggest, Malick respects Pocahontas’s own “aesthetic otherness,” which we feel, but perhaps do not fully, discursively understand, as she runs through this English garden with her son (a garden that is just as much a product of artifice as it is of nature). Pocahontas might, after all, be able to communicate the rapture she feels in the film’s final sequence in discursive terms: by this point in the narrative, she is at least in part the product of an Anglo-Saxon education (in one way, her voice-over feels more at home with her visual figure in this final sequence, primarily because the fact of her speaking English is by the end of the film no longer felt as a disjunction). Yet there is also something spiritual and deeply personal happening in this sequence that Pocahontas’s English does not tell us. In her state of rapture, she prays
to her earth mother – whose spiritual guidance she has sought throughout her becoming in this film – and it is implied that she has finally found the identity she was seeking. For an educated twenty-first century audience, sensitive to the violence enacted in the name of colonial expansion, the image of a Native American woman finding her “earth mother” in the artificial environs of a cultivated English garden is bound to seem strange, even offensive. But I do not think that Malick is suggesting colonialism was “good” for Pocahontas; he is, in fact, refusing to explain this rapture any further in discursive terms (like the refusal to let us know what she has said to her son). Malick’s film thus gently keeps Pocahontas at a distance in this sequence (as opposed to the slightly crueler irony separating us from Holly in Badlands), communicating to us something of the emotional quality of her spiritual discovery but refusing to finalize it through narrative form and the revelation of information that would attempt to fix the film with closure. Perhaps Malick is afraid of what we might do with Pocahontas’s personal meaning here should we get our hands on it: another Disney’s Pocahontas, or another gesture of intolerant violence that inscribes an exchange value on the human soul. Aesthetic feeling replaces signified meaning at the end of The New World and in ways that, to my mind, are fully ethical. Meaning is held in suspension, because the last four-hundred years have shown we are not responsible enough for this particular meaning, if it were even accessible.

Thus, our “co-authoring” of Malick’s films comes to an end, at least for now, with a dialogue gently sundered. As Pocahontas recedes from view, safe – until the next retelling– from the violence of our mythologies and in possession of her own, I am left to wonder further where an ethics of aesthetics might lead us in film studies. Kant’s
conception of aesthetic taste – when put into dialogue with films and contemporary philosophy – might remind us that while taste may be firmly ensconced in the undulating but persistent rhythms of capital, the experience of the aesthetic and a taste for the aesthetic may also offer a site of ethical resistance to the hegemonic instrumentalization of our valuations of film and culture under the sign of capital. Aesthetic experience and taste, always a threat – like virtually any other kind of social or cultural phenomenon – to socially reproduce us in the shape of reactionary formations, is nonetheless that which might also help us more radically think the future, perhaps a future that might lead us to a reformation of a world system that still has its hands blood red from Jamestown. I would like to think that there is much still to say about Malick, and other contemporary American filmmakers, who may throw us productively into the future of our theoretical and philosophical concepts. Even though the film is over, then, it is worth noting that a piece of music remains in my head. It is telling that the film ends with this third citation of Wagner’s \textit{Vorspiel}. Wagner’s music and his theoretical writing were both bound up with a desire for a revolutionary future, and as James Treadwell has suggested in writing of the composer’s work, Wagner’s \textit{Ring} cycle (from which Malick takes this musical extract) ultimately cannot bring about the new world [the opera] describes. It can only reveal its meaning after the fact…Wagner’s efforts to write the future are thus haunted by a curiously inescapable helplessness. However much the prose writings of these years may look like statements of intent – and at first sight they look like nothing
else – they are, essentially, something like the opposite: admissions of incapacity, always deferring the future they anticipate so eagerly.6

If films themselves cannot bring about a new world by themselves – and, like Wagner, whose work is sometimes associated with the most virulent anti-semitism, if films can also at times be marshaled for outright dangerous purposes – it behooves us even more to also understand how our experiences of films may orient us productively towards the future, a future that, past the moment of projection, contains always dialogues with others. The poetry in Malick’s cinema, by refusing to master the fictional worlds it creates, designates a spot for us in co-authoring its significance. The study of film, too, often bound up with theoretical methodologies that are of some value but that rarely think through cinema, would do well to designate a larger spot for not only films themselves, but also for the work of the critic which at least some of those films inspire.


3 Stanley Cavell, Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow, 11.

4 Melinda Szaloky, “Making New Sense of Film Theory Through Kant,” 42.


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