

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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This thesis takes an auteurist approach to the films of director Terrence Malick by reading them through the spiritual philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson. I establish Malick's thematic concern with the human struggle to achieve better existences in a broken material world, a concern buoyed by his signature aesthetic that includes expressive voice-overs and sublime photography of nature. I close-read each of Malick's six films, drawing upon tenants of Emersonian philosophy to reveal Malick's expression of transcendent events of the soul against brutal earthly realities.

In chapter one I put forth *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* as Emersonian "cautionary tales" for lives lived bereft of meaningful communion with the world. Chapter two sees *The Thin Red Line* as Malick's turn toward an explicitly philosophical cinema where the spiritual/material divide becomes paramount. In chapter three I focus on *The New World* and *The Tree of Life* as refined versions of Malick's renewed philosophical interests and style. I conclude on Malick's

latest film, *To the Wonder*, finding that despite his depictions of an increasingly fractured modern world, Malick retains an Emersonian faith in the individual's ability to spiritually transcend material life.

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The Soul Announces Itself: Terrence Malick's Emersonian Cinema

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University Libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Bill Fech, Author

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The Soul Announces Itself: Terrence Malick's Emersonian Cinema

Introduction

*There is a property in the horizon which no man has
but he whose eye can integrate all parts, that is, the poet.*

--Emerson's Nature¹

The Poet

Terrence Malick is one of the American film industry's most enigmatic and intriguing contemporary filmmakers. His six films—*Badlands* (1973), *Days of Heaven* (1978), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *The New World* (2005), *The Tree of Life* (2011), and *To the Wonder* (2012)—reveal a distinct, philosophical vision. His cinema depicts the innate human quest to discover better worlds, either as physical locations or as spiritual sanctuaries.

Malick is a true auteur whose thematic pre-occupations are presented in a unique, signature visual style—a highly stylized aesthetic that combines expressive voice-over narration, sublimely photographed images of nature, and contemplative narrative structures. These qualities, argues scholar Geoff Andrew, contribute to his standing as “the modern American cinema’s great poet-philosopher, whose images...speak of a fascination with—and, perhaps a faith in—the transcendent.”² Lloyd Michaels, author of the book *Terrence Malick*, agrees that he represents “a stubbornly romantic artist in depicting isolated individual’s desire for transcendence.”³ Malick thrives, within the confines of the

Hollywood arena, as a rare meditative voice on the struggle to locate idealized existences.

Michaels' notion of Malick as a stubborn romantic is borne out in the films. In *Badlands*, renegade lovers see the open spaces of Montana as a paradisiacal reprieve during a bloody crime spree. *Days of Heaven* similarly features a young couple on the run for whom a rich homesteader's wealth promises salvation from arduous migrant labor. The World War II film *The Thin Red Line* interrogates the basis for conflict in human nature as soldiers yearn for calm amidst the horror at Guadalcanal. *The New World*, a rendering of the Pocahontas story, depicts European colonizers' founding of Jamestown while the native princess attempts to retain her spiritual ties with Mother Earth. *The Tree of Life* renders three time eras—the present day, 1950s suburbia, and pre-history—as continuums where only grace mitigates the violence of life. And *To the Wonder* investigates the efficacy of love in a fragmented modern world.

Eschewing explanatory backstories, Malick often gives his protagonists symbolic importance rather than sharp specificity. Many major characters are never identified by name, such as the farmer in *Days of Heaven* or the parents in *The Tree of Life*. Multiple, overlapping voice-overs and fragmentary dialogue, often whispered and indistinct, further prevents viewers from perceiving individuals in his films. Standard Hollywood practice builds characters to ferry along a film's action; Malick's use of character positions audiences at a kind of

reflective distance from his work, a quality explained by Michaels as follows: “By deliberately creating flat characters without background or other personal traits, Malick imposes a distancing that requires the audience to engage with a film’s (increasingly metaphysical) ideas or to view human figures as part of a larger design instead of identifying with the dramatic conflicts of his characters.”⁴ For Malick, philosophical inquiry overrides clear characterization, a departure from mainstream cinema in service of his signature vision.

This vision, a romantic expression of the transcendent human experience, aligns Malick with America’s preeminent Transcendentalist philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson. My goal in this thesis is to show how Malick, himself a philosophy scholar, channels many of the same lessons as this central figure in American letters. Just as Emerson believed that “the foundations of man are not in matter, but in spirit,”⁵ so too does Malick champion spiritual cultivation over crude materialism. For both men, humans define themselves too often by surface-level realities where the soul competes against baser earthly concerns.

Emerson took it upon himself to help others craft an “original relation to the universe”⁶ through spiritual self-recovery. He also struggled his whole life against a society suspicious of such calls to higher consciousness, a struggle described by Emerson scholar Richard Geldard as follows: “Just as Plato described the soul (Psyche) as being confined in the body during its earthly existence, so Emerson...saw that our highest yearnings as thinking and feeling

human beings are held in bondage by a materialistic world view that decries most forms of spiritual expression as fantasy or ignorance.”⁷ Material, consumer self-interest stood in stark opposition to his lessons of the spiritual essence of our experience.

Malick’s struggle is against currents of contemporary mainstream cinema, which favors linear narrative and action-spectacle. His films eschew many Hollywood conventions to evince a fundamental conflict between the spiritual and the material, between an Emersonian Idealist potential contained in the mind as opposed to the tangible realities of the senses. He screens events of the soul while most directors linger on corporeal excitement. Emerson looked at the masses as materialists; those attuned to the spiritual integrity of life he dubbed “poets.” Malick, following Emerson’s assertion here, is a poet.

The Sage of Waco

Malick was born in Ottawa, Illinois, in 1943, but was brought up in Waco, Texas. Before enrolling at the Center for Advanced Film Studies at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles in 1969, he was on his way to a promising career in academia, specializing in the existential and phenomenological thought of German Idealist Martin Heidegger. He excelled at Harvard and Oxford and then taught at MIT while translating Heidegger’s *The Essence of Reason* (1969). He also visited the reclusive thinker late in his life at his Black Forest cottage. Malick’s desire to compose his dissertation on the concept of “world” in the work

of Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein was met with disdain by his Oxford advisor (who dubbed the topic “not philosophical enough”) and within two years, he exited from academia, finding himself “at the end of his rope as a philosopher.”⁸ Filmmaking, not philosophical scholarship, would define the rest of his life. Critic Martin Woessner sees Malick’s turn to movies as a means for the dissatisfied scholar to more ably realize the philosophical basis of his worldview. Film has the potential to concretize conceptual ideas via visual or aural means; Malick may have “recognized that film had great philosophical potential. Its practicality alone meant that it could easily sidestep the abstractions inherent in traditional philosophical reflection.”⁹

The most popular critical way to approach Malick’s filmmaking has, understandably, been through Heidegger. This inclination is nicely traced by John Rhym,¹⁰ who sees a paradigmatic “extension” (a word he amends from “shift”) occur in Malick scholarship beginning in the late 1990s, following the release of *The Thin Red Line*. Until this point, in keeping with the spirit of New Hollywood scholarship (which favored close readings against the backdrop of genre), scholars viewed *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* as tweaks or outright challenges to popular generic formulas: the “fugitive lovers” motif in the former case (recalling films such as Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* [1967] and Steven Spielberg’s *The Sugarland Express* [1974]); the romantic-historic epic in the latter (such as Penn’s *The Missouri Breaks* [1976] and Michael Cimino’s *Heaven’s Gate* [1980]).

Such readings seem all the more apt when we consider Malick's very early work as a genre screenwriter; he penned the script for the Hollywood western *Pocket Money* (1972) just after completing his thesis film from AFI, a short western called *Lanton Mills* (1969). But the release of *The Thin Red Line*, in tandem with a critical shift in American academia that began to embrace Continental (read: Heideggerean) philosophy, encouraged critics to regard Malick's films—all of them—in context to Heidegger's philosophy. This context has so dominated Malick scholarship that Woessner, describing the director's hybrid position between big-budget quality and high-brow "artiness," says he is "split between Hollywood and Heidegger."¹¹

A quick look at Heidegger's philosophy as it relates to Malick is in order. Heidegger devoted his career to the question of Being. To use one of his own examples, whereas Descartes was satisfied to declare "I think; therefore, I am," Heidegger thought it better to ask "What is 'am'?" What does it mean for something to exist? His investigation led him to articulate *Dasein*, "his neologism for human experience,"¹² which comes under question when confronted with "worldhood," that is, the everydayness of *Dasein*'s experience. Put simply, humans, as beings capable of questioning Being, do so through a series of "world-disclosing" events that shatter our complacency with the everyday. For example, critics employing Heidegger often claim that Malick's attention to beautiful imagery, including micro- and macro-photography where close-ups of leaves

share screen time with grand vistas, creates an “uncanny” impression of everyday existence. Christopher Yates, author of the essay “A Phenomenological Aesthetic of Cinematic Worlds,” parses out these details in an excerpt about Malick’s *Days of Heaven*:

Consider...the ability of films to capture a sense of being-in-the-world, and a corresponding summons to renewed 'concern' by photographing the ordinary, uncanny elements of existence. Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978) opens with images of a Chicago steel mill: junk-pickers kicking through debris, coal shoveled into a furnace, the pouring of molten iron. Then there are waves of golden Great Plains wheat, a silhouetted scarecrow and signalmen flags carrying their message from hill to hill. The result is a seamless visual experience where the subtlety of specific things is drawn out to indicate the nature of the world and the life of our protagonists.¹³

This is to say that critics using Heidegger stress Malick’s characters’ interactions with objects and the natural world, that is, how “everyday equipment [functions] as world disclosing entities”¹⁴ where people construct identities—such as Kit and Holly in *Badlands*. The soldiers in *The Thin Red Line*, to provide another example, interact with their world based on their perceptions of imminent death, what Heidegger called “Being-towards-Death.” Such readings of Malick tend to study how his characters are situated in distinct “worlds” that are called into question, resulting in moments of existential “dread.” As Woessner explains these moments: “It is only when we are anxious that we inquire into the structure or meaning of the world; otherwise we simply go about living.”¹⁵

Though Heidegger and Emerson emphasize the metaphysical concept of “world” in their work, their differences are significant. Emerson, writing a century prior to Heidegger, stresses communion with nature, an ethereal unity of all things, and an optimistic belief in individual spiritual revelation. His spiritual nonconformity, also, aligns his work with the ways many of Malick’s characters—Witt, Pocahontas—come to discover their relation to the universe on their own terms. Additionally, including Emerson in the discussion of Malick returns us to an earlier historical origin of Continental thought; talking about Emerson is effectively going “straighter to the source” of Malick’s philosophical sensibility. Finally, a new look at Malick’s cinema with Emerson at hand breaks away from the critical tendency to use Heidegger when discussing Malick’s work. I argue that such a study is overdue and very rewarding.

Finding Malick

Malick is notoriously shy. He gave two interviews about *Badlands* in 1975 (relatively standard “making-of” accounts) and has not spoken about his work since. He does not even appear in “behind-the-scenes” DVD special features, as if materially excised from his creative work. This modesty surprises us today; we are accustomed to filmmakers marketing their work through press interviews and festival appearances. A “Malick sighting” creates a stir. In a 2012 episode of the celebrity gossip T.V. program *TMZ*,¹⁶ paparazzi accidentally shot footage of the reclusive writer-director while attempting to film Benicio Del Toro on the streets

of Los Angeles. Only after the fact did *TMZ* discover it had caught on film one of the most highly respected and mysterious filmmakers in the industry. In a world where Tarantino-esque celebrity-directors are increasingly the norm, Malick favors quiet fame. It is actually quite in keeping with his films' message about the downfall of hollow material existence—were Malick to parade himself around late night T.V. pitching his work, something of his Emersonian iconoclasm would be lost in the airwaves. The result of this reticence, though, is that we have little direct clarification from Malick himself about the influence that Heidegger, Emerson, or any other philosopher has had on his work. Given so little insight from the director, we must look to the films themselves.

Much of my argument in the chapters to follow rests on what I see as a schism between Malick's early work (*Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*) and his later work (*The Thin Red Line* and beyond). In chapter one I explore how Malick's first films function as Emersonian "cautionary tales" for people ignorant to spiritual wholeness, a wholeness Emerson called the event of "self-recovery." Kit and Holly in *Badlands*, as well as the characters in *Days of Heaven*, conceive of paradise in physical terms rather than higher states of consciousness. Not surprisingly, these characters meet sad ends, trapped by the very material ambitions they set for themselves. Chapter two moves onto *The Thin Red Line*, the major turn in Malick's career where he employs a radically different aesthetic from his early films. He particularly alters his voice-overs, which he uses to

evinced an ever-present, ethereal “voice-over-soul” that unites individuals in a mutual quest for answers to life’s mysteries. *The Thin Red Line* also marks Malick’s move to more sublime depictions of nature, which he treats as a realm of spiritual transcendence for souls attuned to it. In chapter three I discuss Malick’s next two films, *The New World* and *The Tree of Life*, which continue his preoccupation with self-recovery through harmonious communion with the universe. Finally, my conclusion touches on Malick’s latest film, *To the Wonder*, as a means of evaluating the director’s persistent Emersonian themes at what appears to be a moment of truth in his career. In order to better appreciate and understand Malick’s oeuvre, I will focus on how his films capture key Emersonian ideas through specific cinematic language.

The Sage of Concord

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1802-1882) was the founder of American Transcendentalism, a philosophical movement that defied religious and social orthodoxy in 19th-century America. Drawn to metaphysical modes of thought coming out of Germany during his time at Harvard (chiefly Kant’s Idealism), Emerson applied an American individualist outlook to posit that personal intuition was superior to the dogmatic tradition passed down by clergy or social custom. In doing so, he placed an emphasis on the “primacy of self-consciousness.”¹⁷ This approach was partly a response to philosopher John Locke’s materialist empiricism (which held that everything can be explained by humans’ sensory

experience) and partly a reaction against what Emerson viewed as the materialist, conformist culture around him. “Why should we not enjoy an original relation to the universe?” he asks in *Nature*. “Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?”¹⁸ Along with his friend and disciple, Henry David Thoreau, Emerson became a proponent for spiritual individualism. Even in the midst of national crises like the Mexican-American War and the fight to end slavery, when critics questioned the efficacy of so much flowery introspection, he held firm that only when the self was cured spiritually could society transform: “The new world would not arrive until each obeyed his or her genius, ‘the only liberating influence’.”¹⁹ Emerson sought to help individuals develop this liberating influence, and his writings, from his foundational book *Nature* to essays such as “The Over-Soul” and “Experience,” articulate the Divine law according to which each person may know his nature and act accordingly.

In this thesis I will focus on Emerson the spiritual philosopher as opposed to the social non-conformist rallying against educational practices at Harvard (“The Divinity School Address”) or America’s use of slave labor (“The Fugitive Slave Law”). Considering the sheer volume of Emerson’s ideas, I have further narrowed my approach, following scholar David Robinson’s parsing out of three central principles in Emerson’s spiritual thought—three principles that fit well into my discussion of Malick’s cinema: inwardness, unity, and right action.

Inwardness refers to Emerson's emphasis on "an awareness of and reverence for the unique processes of thought, perception, intuition, and emotional response that define our experience [in service of constructing] a durable and authentic form of identity."²⁰ Common people, distracted by the trivialities of everyday life and compelled to dogmatic obedience to culture, need to consult and place trust in one's inner consciousness to achieve wholeness of self: "Nothing at last is sacred but the integrity of your own mind" ("Self Reliance").²¹ Once directed inward, humans can then aspire outward, to *unity*: "Emerson's philosophy was founded on his belief in a kinship with other individuals and with the things and events around us that suggest common origins and shared constitution of all reality."²² The self-reliant egotism sometimes associated with Emerson must be viewed as part of a crucial connectivity with the universe, a grand lineage from the same spiritual source: "We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are shining parts, is the soul" ("The Over-Soul").²³ Finally, Emerson believed living a meaningful life carried with it moral obligations. The parameters of *right action*, the everyday choices and broader moral crises at the center of lived experience, is paramount to his philosophy: "To recognize a unique and infinitely deep nature within was incomplete until we were able to enact that nature in some meaningful way. Life was, as Emerson believed, an unending series of choices, each of which

demanded an ethical response.”²⁴ Achieving a complete self in relation to broader life involves a moral imperative to one’s conduct.

Geldard contends that these qualities—inwardness, unity, right action—contribute to the spiritual wholeness that Emerson believed lay dormant in most of the world: “First came awareness of mind, then knowledge of the human condition, and finally, action in the world based on this knowledge. Without that sequence, nothing of value could be accomplished.”²⁵ I will argue throughout this thesis that Malick’s films depict characters exploring—to mixed degrees and with mixed success—revelations of higher consciousness, spiritual unity, or right action.

The word “revelation” here is key. To Emerson, self-recovery was attained by revelatory experiences, “of exultations of the spirit so profound that the mind and heart would be transformed by them.”²⁶ In “The Over-Soul,” he writes: “We distinguish announcements of the soul, its manifestations of its own nature, by the term Revelation. These are always attended by the emotion of the sublime. For this communication is an influx of the Divine mind into our mind. It is an ebb of the individual rivulet before the flowing surges of the sea of life.”²⁷ For Emerson these moments of heightened self-consciousness were not found inside crowded churches, passed down by stale religious orthodoxy, but were available to every person awakened to the Divine within. The everyday world and the human mind contain the sublime as part of their natural order.

An Emersonian Cinema

Malick's films express the sublime and the potential for Emersonian revelation. His trademark cinematography, for instance, eschews the strict and static camerawork used by most filmmakers to capture a scene in a natural setting. Instead he dollies, tracks, and tilts to imbue nature with mystic qualities. Michaels writes that Malick's "camera's fixed attention to the sheer gorgeousness or isolated perfection of the imagery it records...takes us back to American transcendentalism and Emerson's ecstatic vision of becoming a 'transparent eyeball' in the midst of the Concord Woods..."²⁸ What he means, referencing Emerson's famous description of higher consciousness in nature, is that Malick's compositions (e.g. low angle shots of sunlight streaming down through leaves, low angle shots of characters raising their arms toward celestial sunsets) gives his visuals significance beyond mere "settings" for his drama. To Malick, the jungles of Guadalcanal or the forests of Virginia "awaken," as Emerson says in *Nature* "a certain reverence [and]...make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence."²⁹ In *The Thin Red Line*, for example, Private Witt is open to the influence of nature through how he sees it. He is able to pause in the middle of war to contemplate leaves, dirt, water, or trees, the same trees that later fracture the sunlight that shines down upon his death. "In the tranquil landscape," Emerson writes, "and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature."³⁰ Again and again, Malick's careful

attention to natural imagery (and his use of natural lighting is significant also) signifies an Ideal natural setting where self-recovery can and does take place.

Voice-over also becomes in Malick's hands a filmic device for Emersonian meditations. Starting with *The Thin Red Line*, Malick uses multiple voice-overs that are not always distinguishable from one another. Voices sound so alike that it becomes difficult to ascribe them to specific characters, such as when soldiers ponder universal mysteries throughout *The Thin Red Line*. Malick also does not always clearly connect his voice-overs to on-screen information. Rather than buoying narrative or building character (as conventional voice-overs do), Malick's voices come and go like fragments of thought, asking abstract questions not immediately grounded in the screen. They sometimes even stretch over realms of time as in *The Tree of Life*, where a mother's voice-over accompanies sequences set in the cosmos. Like Emerson's conception of the Over-Soul (discussed in chapter two), Malick's "voice-over-soul," as I call his use of the device, "abolishes time and space"³¹ to replicate the interconnected and self-inquisitive nature of the human experience.

The self-inquisitive nature of his films results from characters asking several questions: questions of nature, of existence, or of higher powers. Questions, to Emerson, were of vital importance to self-recovery because they suggested a desire to announce the soul more entirely and truthfully. From *Nature* ("To what end is nature?") to "Experience" ("Where do we find ourselves?"), he

pondered mysteries that he felt the majority of people did not. Geldard explains that “the idea was to look at the human condition and understand the universe. And when a human being asks a question of the universe, the question itself is a sign of the human condition.”³² So when *The Thin Red Line* opens with an unknown voice-over asking “What’s this war at the heart of nature?” or when a Catholic priest in *To the Wonder* ponders “What is this love that loves us?” Malick puts front and center the fundamental task of philosophical inquiry that Emerson brought to bear in his writings and which he championed as necessary to spiritual wholeness.

I focus on cinematography and voice-over, and to a lesser extent music, lighting, and editing—the basic ingredients of cinema—throughout this thesis. These aspects of cinematic style and form are like “parts of the soul”; they contribute to Malick’s broader thematic interest in the spiritual/material divide his characters navigate. His characters do not arrive at spiritual self-recovery easily; they struggle against material realities, struggles that form the basis of his films’ dramatic conflicts.

Badlands and *Days of Heaven* express ironic, detached pessimism about the world. These two films also feature more conventional voice-over, restrained (though gorgeous) cinematography, and spiritually hollow characters. Later Malick’s films evince an optimistic outlook on the human condition. This shift is highlighted in explicit depictions of spiritual self-recovery explored in his

multiple voice-overs and sublime cinematography. Private Witt, Pocahontas, and other characters experience revelations that allow for transcendence from their physical suffering. Through these characters and through his style of filmmaking, Malick expresses Emerson's end goal for the human race: "To unite with spirit through nature [in order to] experience the paradisiacal state of Man before the Fall."³³

Emerson is only one figure in a long list of artistic or literary influences critics have explored in Malick's films. In the first monograph on his cinema, James Morrison and Thomas Schur's *The Films of Terrence Malick*, the authors cite a large range of potential influences, including Flannery O'Connor, Willa Cather, Norman Mailer, and Henry James. These names supplement others that commonly appear in Malick scholarship as sensibilities at play in his films, such as painter Edward Hopper, author Mark Twain, and filmmakers Arthur Penn and F.W. Murnau. These comparisons stress Malick's heavily stylized visuals and strong character subjectivity—aspects of his oeuvre that mark him as an auteur aware of the romantic storytelling lineage of which he is a part.

In addition, some critics study Malick's films through philosophical lenses other than Heideggerean ontology. Scholars Thomas Deane Tucker and Steven Rybin, for example, draw upon diverse philosophical figures for insight. In a 2011 collection of essays edited by Tucker, *Terrence Malick: Film and Philosophy*, scholars employ theorists ranging from Derrida to Deleuze to Marx for

discussion, but the glossary reveals not one mention of Emerson. The other recent monograph on Malick, Rybin's *Terrence Malick and the Thought of Film* (2012), likewise leaves out Emerson entirely. Rybin instead employs theorists such as Kant, Benjamin, Morin (and a healthy dose of Heidegger) in order to argue for the multiplicity of theory and philosophy contained in Malick's films.

The absence of Emerson from these two books exploring philosophy in Malick's work seems initially surprising, but it may reflect a lingering critical ambiguity about which side of the Atlantic to place Malick. His films generally depict distinct American histories: 1950s counter-culture, the battle of Guadalcanal, the founding of Jamestown, etc. John Orr, in his book *Contemporary Cinema*, posits that Malick's output establishes him alongside American filmmakers such as Robert Altman, David Lynch, and Martin Scorsese in that he poetically renders the mythical promise of the American Dream through characters' dramatic conflicts.³⁴ At the same time, as Hannah Patterson writes, Malick's penchant for "slow" and "high-brow" aesthetics places him "within a certain European tradition" to many critics.³⁵ Malick also frequently courts comparisons with European art directors such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean-Luc Godard, and Andrei Tarkovsky, whose slow-paced, stylized films contribute to a broad category of filmmaking dubbed "poetic."³⁶ This is all to say that critics perennially situate Malick as straddling the line between American and European sensibilities, and this may account for recent studies in which Emerson, the

American Transcendentalist, is left aside in favor of a host of European influences.

When Emerson is mentioned in popular reviews and critical work as an influence on Malick (particularly his later work), few critics go into much detail. Reviewing *The Tree of Life*, Kent Jones writes that “it is fairly common, and just, to bring up Emerson in discussions of Malick’s last three films,” that “there seems little doubt that he’s been foundational for Malick.”³⁷ Critic Ron Mottram, meanwhile, positions Malick’s cinema within the intellectual history of American Transcendentalism, arguing that Malick’s unique vision, penchant for philosophical questioning, and willingness to challenge the aesthetic conventions of his day “[links] him to such writers as Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and James Agee.”³⁸ But these two comments are broad overviews rather than sharp studies of how Malick’s films channel Emersonian lessons.

A rare example of a reading that does go into detail is Stacy Peebles Power’s article “The Other World of War: Terrence Malick’s Adaptation of *The Thin Red Line*.”³⁹ Power explores the differences between Malick’s film, James Jones’ source novel, and the first filmic adaptation of the story, Andrew Marton’s little seen 1964 version. She argues that Malick “transcends the war genre” by “[excising] the bodily and sexual thematics” of Jones’ book to “emphasize the transcendent soul.” Part of her argument details the experience of Private Witt, an

iconoclastic spirit whose communion with nature recalls Emerson's *Nature*. Witt's calm serenity in nature, the spiritual connection he seeks with others, and his inquisitive voice-over makes his "transcendent soul...[the] center of the film," capped off with his self-sacrificial death. For Power, Witt and his transcendent death help Malick move beyond the madness of the war genre by offering a spiritual escape from the blood and guts of physical existence.

Power's article attests to the benefits of examining Malick's cinema with Emerson more immediately in mind. Like her, I will focus with more rigor and specificity on Emerson than has generally been carried out by Malick critics. By examining the director's entire body of films in a detailed way, this thesis is able to make more comprehensive observations about the arc of Malick's Emersonian cinema than is possible in single-film studies. Malick's personal background and his standing in the American film industry warrant such an analysis. This thesis helps bridge the gap between Emersonian spirituality and concrete filmic language, a union that sheds more light on Malick's philosophical cinema.

Chapter One

Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual.

-- Emerson's "The Over-Soul"⁴⁰

*The reason why the world lacks unity and lies broken
and in heaps is because man is disunited with himself.*

-- Emerson's Nature⁴¹

Paradise Glimpsed—and Lost: Failed Transcendence in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*

Before Malick gained a reputation for metaphysical cinema, he made two features that attend to the material aspirations, not the spiritual cultivations, of his characters. In *Badlands*, Kit and Holly undertake a deadly crime spree because of their weak conceptions of self and their dependency on superficial ways of living. *Days of Heaven*, though more attuned to the sublime essence of nature, also explores the spiritual failings of a young couple: in this case, class-struggle plays a direct role in the quest for paradise, as Bill and Abby exploit a wealthy farmer to escape arduous migrant labor. In both films, characters suffer in their earthly prisons, neglecting spiritual selves that Emerson thought indispensable to meaningful life.

In this chapter, I stress the destructive consequences of lives lived bereft of Emersonian spirituality in Malick's first two films. These works are preliminary forms of the explicit philosophizing of his later work, where ruminative voice-over and evocative depictions of nature express the self-

recovery of his characters. *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* are avenues for Malick, a new filmmaker at the time, to tentatively work through the spiritual/material divide that dominates the rest of his career.

The films can be read as “cautionary tales” for what happens when introspection and higher consciousness are neglected in favor of tangible material concerns (such as the desire for celebrity or capital—two elements Emerson damned as ruinous to self-cultivation). Emerson believed that the majority of people lived the way the characters in Malick’s first two films do, that is, asleep to the Divine within. He writes in “Experience”: “...the Genius which...stands by the door by which we enter, and gives us the lethe to drink, mixed the cup too strongly, and we cannot shake off the lethargy now at noonday. Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes. ...Our life is not so much threatened as our perception.”⁴² In other words, Emerson believed that most people were unable or unwilling to tap into new, revelatory perspectives that would lead to meaningful spirituality.

Keeping this in mind, my argument is two-fold: first, narratively, these films emphasize the material over the spiritual (which spells doom for characters); and second, Malick renders this stylistically via a strategy of “aesthetic distancing” through characters’ (dis)placements within nature and detached voice-over narration. Malick retains his characteristic eye for beauty, and occasionally depicts “flashes” of transcendence akin to Emersonian revelation,

but these are isolated events against backdrops of pessimism or tragedy—the material world-view “wins out” in both cases. I see *Badlands* as an ironic treatment on the quest for self-definition, whereas *Days of Heaven* takes a Biblical approach to craft a parable about the Fall of Man.

To support my reading of the films as failed paradises, it helps to situate them in their cine-historical context, namely the Hollywood Renaissance. This is an organizing term for a period of American cinema from the late 1960s to the early 1980s when directors such as Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and Martin Scorsese released a body of boundary-pushing films such as *The Godfather* (Coppola, 1972), *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973), *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975), *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976), and *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979). Most of these directors honed their craft in the country’s recently founded film schools, and all were the beneficiaries of industrial, social, and ideological shifts that briefly swayed Hollywood to embrace risky auteurist pictures before the blockbuster model proved more dependably lucrative (sparked by *Jaws* and confirmed by *Star Wars* [Lucas, 1977]). Hollywood Renaissance films often look pessimistically on American history and contemporary society, a quality informed by the decidedly fractured and disillusioned social landscape at the time. The Watergate scandal, national economic instability, contentious social revolutions, and the war in Vietnam all contributed to a climate of cynicism in a country long-removed from post-World War II patriotic exultation.

Malick began his filmmaking career in this atmosphere, rubbing shoulders with some of the aforementioned directors at the AFI school. Though not as prominent a figure in the movement (no doubt owing to his reclusiveness), Malick's early films are often positioned scholastically within this frame. Caroline Zucker says they "share the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate apocalyptic vision of films...of that period which chronicle the loss of American innocence."⁴³ Set in distinct American pasts and colored by the political and social tumult of the 1970s, *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* can thus be approached as Robert Zaller calls them: "critiques of utopia, both on a personal and social level, in a time of profound political disillusionment."⁴⁴ It is within this framework of cynicism in a lost American dream-scape that I turn to the films themselves.

Badlands

Badlands is based on the Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate serial murders in which the romantic couple, twenty- and fourteen-years-old respectively, killed eleven people across Nebraska and Wyoming in 1958. In Malick's film, Kit (Martin Sheen), a garbage collector, courts the shy teenager, Holly (Sissy Spacek) in their sleepy South Dakotan town. After Holly's father (Warren Oates) forbids Kit from seeing her, Kit kills him in an impromptu fight, lights fire to the house, and splits town with Holly. The pair build a secluded

shelter in the woods (a failed Walden experiment if ever there was one), but must abscond when a local posse (which Kit dispatches with a rifle) tracks them down. Holly sticks by Kit, oscillating between childlike infatuation with his handsomeness and passive distaste for the haphazard way he shoots people (he also kills: an old work buddy, Cato, to keep him from snitching; a state trooper; and maybe a young couple who stumble upon their crimes—it's not clear if they die). Driving across the Badlands, seeing the barren north as their salvation, the pair is eventually cornered by police. Holly refuses to join Kit in one last escape attempt, which ends when he surrenders in a self-aggrandizing gesture, stacking rocks to mark his point of capture. Holly's final voice-over, as the plane carrying her and Kit sails into the sky, tells us he was executed for his crimes; she gets off easy and marries the son of her defense lawyer.

Malick scholar Mottram argues that *Badlands* “stands as a commentary on the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of transcendence in the post-modern, post-Vietnam world.”⁴⁵To expand this claim, I point out aesthetic and narrative qualities that displace Kit, especially, from self-consciousness or meaningful relationships with nature. I also examine Holly's ironic, detached voice-over narration, a distanced, contradictory presence that muddles the film's intelligibility. In doing so, we can read Kit and Holly as spiritually empty youths navigating a backdrop of lost paradise.

Material Identities

The film sets up failed personal transcendence through characterization of its two main figures. Whereas Malick's later work features characters curious about existence, Michaels claims that the "sad mystery of *Badlands* emanates from Kit and Holly's limited self-awareness."⁴⁶ (30). Much of the film revolves around their lack of distinct personalities. Malick introduces Kit as a wanderer, framed in a trash-strewn alley as he kicks cans and balances a mop on his palm. Later fired from his garbage-throwing job for his come-and-go approach, he relies on a job agency for work on a cattle feedlot. But this prospect also holds no promise, brought home nicely when Kit stands on top of a dead cow, bored. (He shows comparable indifference to death when he dares Cato to eat a dead dog in an alley, and again in his blank reaction to Holly's father's death.)

Other clues show Kit's willingness to disavow his identity completely. When telling Holly his last name, Carruthers, he waves it off as "a thing attached to him at birth."⁴⁷ He is aware of his lower-class status, but only as a wedge between him and Holly: shyly confessing to her that he throws garbage for a living, he quickly clarifies that he's "not in love with the stuff." Kit is thus defined from the start of the film by his opaque conception of self. Malick will highlight this feature twice with ironic comments directed at Kit from other characters: Holly's father, who quips "You somethin'," and a state trooper, who says "You're quite an individual, Kit." His schizoid role-playing, in which he

switches from self-righteous loudspeaker of etiquette (“Somebody dropped a bag on the sidewalk—if everyone did that the whole town would be a mess”) to cold-blooded murderer (though pausing to hold the door open for his victim) further renders him a conflicted, off-kilter individual.

Another way the film discloses Kit’s lack of self is through his tortured use of language. Within the dialogue, it’s apparent that Kit, despite his frequent boasting, doesn’t have anything meaningful to share. “I got some stuff to say,” he tells Holly. “Guess I’m lucky that way. Most people don’t have anything on their minds, do they?” But he contradicts himself twice in the film: when the job agent asks what kind of work he’s cut out for, Kit mumbles that he “can’t think of nothing”; and later, he tells the rich man whom he’s taken hostage that “thinking” is “as good a way to kill time as any.” His Dictaphone recordings further show Kit’s inarticulateness. Unable to fill even sixty-seconds in a timed recording booth, he sighs and struggles to wring out cliché constructions: “Holly and I have decided to kill ourselves. Same as we did her dad. Big decision, huh? The reasons are obvious. I don’t have to go into them now.” Shortly afterward he peters out with: “That’s the end of the message. I ran out of things to say.”

His second recording takes the tone of a person assured of his posthumous influence over others, but he again resorts to banal platitudes: “Listen to your parents and teachers. They got a line on most things, so don’t treat them like enemies. There’s always an outside chance you can learn something. Try and

keep an open mind. Consider the minority opinion, but try to get along with the majority of opinion, once it's accepted." Many of Kit's comments in the film disclose not a "man thinking," (as Emerson described those who attained knowledge from intuition or nature), but a receptacle for language to spill out of in attempts to make anyone listen. As Patterson says, "It is in his attempts to speak then—his urgent need to display his words to others—that he actually reveals his faltering sense of identity."⁴⁸

Holly's middle-class tranquility, by contrast, provides more stability to her character. The film opens on her lounging on her bed, playing with her dog, as her voice-over tells of her father's decision to move from Texas to South Dakota after her mother's death. The lighthearted music underscoring the scene (a childlike piece from French composer Erik Satie) confers a happy, fanciful tone. Though never viewed with friends, Holly plays clarinet and twirls baton, glowing in the warm sunlight surrounding her house, a vision of tranquil Americana. But it's clear that despite these privileges, Holly too lacks any substantial awareness of self. She admits she is surprised Kit likes her because, in her own eyes, "[she doesn't] have a lot of personality." Turns out this quality suits Kit just fine: "I looked good to him and whatever I did was okay. And if I didn't have a lot to say well that was okay too." Holly's interchangeable identity is also apparent in Kit's several nicknames for her (Red, Priscilla, Tex, and Mildred), as well as scenes where Holly experiments with her appearance, trying on make-up and putting

curlers in her hair in the woods. Little wonder that Malick withholds the film's title graphic until the first point Holly and Kit occupy the same frame, a wide shot of her twirling her baton on her front lawn as he walks over—an image that seals their mutual fates as two spiritually hollow youths.

As a result of their incomplete senses of self, Kit and Holly adopt superficial, material lives. Kit, specifically, enacts two different but complimentary behaviors, both of which work against spiritual introspection: a hijacking of makeshift identities, and a series of “self-mythologizing”⁴⁹ behaviors in his devout attention to material items.

First, on makeshift identities, the most obvious point here is Kit's emulation of James Dean. Though he never explicitly says he wishes to imitate Dean, it's clear he retains a “semiconscious appropriation of Dean's physical mannerisms and identity.”⁵⁰ Both Holly and a state trooper remark on his resemblance to Dean: his haircut, his clothes, and his cigarettes all evoke the 50s-era icon. On the run, Kit and Holly decide to change their names to “James” (certainly not an accident) and “Priscilla.” The film also endorses a comparison to Dean considering Kit's early death, which (Kit hopes) leaves behind a celebrity legacy (the way Starkweather's did).

But Kit's craving for celebrity is not the impetus for the film's action—his desire for recognition only occurs gradually as he kills. His and Holly's crime spree lacks the rebellious and socially subversive qualities of a *Bonnie and Clyde*-

style rampage because their behaviors are defined more as improvised searches for meaning or escape than clearly articulated gestures. Kit's murder of Holly's father is a spontaneous reaction to being threatened, not a calculated move to begin a life of crime. (And just contrast Clyde Barrow's declarative moniker "We rob banks" to Kit's mumbled "Believe I shoot people now and then.") Kit discovers as he kills that people are finally paying attention to him. This notion makes him, as Michaels says, "a delusional or misguided adventurer... whose only dream is to be recognized."⁵¹ His self-important Dictaphone recordings, several casual remarks about his burgeoning cultural importance (like when he claims the rich man could "sell that list I gave him to sample my handwriting,") and his attraction to material items (the refuge of a spiritually damaged soul) all carry out this plan.

This final point is crucial for an Emersonian understanding of Kit. Physical emblems are the only things that count to Kit, and he uses them to pronounce his presence or memorialize "important" events. For example, after having apparently forgettable sex with Holly ("Is that all there is to it?" she asks), he says they should smash their hands with a rock "so we'll never forget what happened today." When she scoffs him off, he finds a smaller one and pockets it, intent on retaining a souvenir. (Rocks—the ultimate symbol of tangible earth—again become a signifier at the end of the film, when Kit stacks stones to mark his point of capture.)

Kit carries out similar behaviors over the course of the film, creating his “tendency to commodify the worthless.”⁵² After lighting fire to Holly’s home, Kit grabs, of all things, a lamp, which is uselessly domestic inside the couple’s makeshift tree house. At times, Kit’s penchant for the material conveys his lack of empathy. After carrying Holly’s dead father (whom he murdered) to the basement, Kit reemerges and presents Holly with his latest treasure: “I found a toaster.” She slaps him. Elsewhere, Kit attempts to romanticize objects by embedding them in time. He launches a basket of “little tokens and things” into the air via a red balloon as a testament to his and Holly’s relationship, and he later buries in the earth a bucket of knickknacks he and Holly can recover later “when they are different people.”

But as if to suggest the pointlessness of Kit’s souvenirs, Malick shows him discarding his excess baggage in the film’s final act. He shoots and deflates a football on the side of the road, and he also tosses Holly’s things into a gas station barrel after their separation, telling the attendant “If you want any of that junk, it’s yours.” Kit’s casual disposal of things which he once held so dear underscores Malick’s broader strategy of undermining his characters’ quests for paradise in earthly terms, or at least it suggests that such worlds cannot exist alongside the hollow infatuation with “stuff.”

Mocked Paradise

Throughout the film, Malick establishes and then mocks the notion that paradise outwardly exists for the spiritually dead. There are several models of utopia set up: Holly's home, before she meets Kit; Holly's father's brightly painted mural depicting an idealized scene; and the natural landscape, open and gorgeous, that Kit and Holly traverse but rarely connect with.

Holly's home is initially depicted as a warm place for an upbringing. Among many domestic antiques is a large dollhouse perched in her room, a microcosm of her actual house, an orderly structure of 1950s upbringing. But Kit's arrival sets in motion the destruction of this innocent space. This is apparent when Kit sets fire to the house. Favoring extreme close-ups, Malick's camera lingers on the bright orange flames as they devour the home's interior. Similar to the scene near the end of *Days of Heaven* in which fire destroys the farmer's wheat fields, Malick seems fascinated by the apocalyptic nature of the flames; he scores the sequence with a choral arrangement that sadly, but beautifully, laments the loss. At one point the flames engulf Holly's dollhouse, which suggests her crumbling childhood at the hands of Kit's violent rootlessness.

The burning house scene is anticipated by an earlier sequence in which an idyllic scene is ridiculed as superficial. When Kit seeks Holly's father out to ask permission to marry her, he finds him painting a brightly colored mural (an advertisement for a grain lot) in an odd desert wasteland. There are no

distinguishing marks to this place, no roads or landmarks around which one could orient one's self—it's a useless place to erect an advertisement. The mural depicts exterior home life, complete with a house, chickens, and a small pond: a vision of utopia. The paint-by-number quality of the mural mimics the starkly defined sky and earth of the background outside the painting, creating a visual parallel between the two worlds. But a slab of the sign stands removed from the painting so that one can see through it; the idyll literally has holes in it. Furthermore the sign, emblazoned with the word "friendly," stands in direct contrast to the real-life drama playing out in the scene between Kit and Holly's father, which is decidedly hostile. The result of this scene, which is bracketed by Malick's relatively rare use of wide establishing shots to introduce the layout and features of the setting, is a sly undermining of the paradise Holly's suburban life supposedly represents as well as the likelihood that any of these characters will find higher realms of life.

Finally, through both dialogue and camerawork, *Badlands* expresses characters' distance from spiritual belonging in nature. Connection with nature is one of Emerson's most crucial principals for leading a spiritually complete life, but (as Kit and Holly demonstrate through most of the film), he believed that the masses are not attuned to its transformative power. "Most persons do not see the sun," he writes in *Nature*. "At least they have a very superficial seeing."⁵³ By this Emerson means that nature exists for most for its material properties rather than its transformative abilities where one can "craft an original relation to the

universe.” Holly and Kit craft no such relation. Sitting under a tree playing cards, she mentions “It’s nice here.” Without looking up from his hand, Kit can only mutter “Yeah, the tree makes it nice.” Excerpts like this lead Rybin to contend that, unlike Malick’s later protagonists, Kit and Holly are disconnected from the intimate details of [Malick’s] imagery.⁵⁴ Instead of engaging spiritually with these details, Kit and Holly see the world as a place to travel through to get somewhere else. Malick often casts Kit and Holly against wide expanses of horizon, using telephoto or medium-long shots to isolate and flatten them within frames. This contributes to what Orr calls an “aesthetic distancing” in which the Western landscape, far from a welcoming or empowering place, “[swallows] those whose presence inhabits them.”⁵⁵ Thus characters are figured as being “in” their world materially, but not “of” them in any meaningful way, and incapable of achieving meaningful revelations.

A prime example of this occurs late in the film. Malick’s camera pans across the evening horizon until settling on Kit, standing with his back to us, a rifle slung over his shoulders. The gorgeousness of the imagery, accentuated by Kit’s isolation in the frame, might suggest a revelatory moment where Kit contemplates his existence or the error of his actions. Such moments of isolation in nature, Emerson believed, were necessary for spiritual self-recovery: “If a man would be alone,” he writes in *Nature*, “let him look at the stars.... The stars awaken a certain reverence because though always present they are always

inaccessible.”⁵⁶ Geldard elaborates on these moments: “The exercise of going alone in the dark of the night to look up at the heavens frees the mind from attachments, and once freed there is the possibility that one might experience the feeling of awe, that emotion essential to reverence.”⁵⁷ Instead, as Kit glances around, he appears inconsequentially dwarfed by the landscape; his face, slack-jawed with empty eyes, registers nothing but detachment. Malick comically positions him in a montage of nearby animals, placing our “celebrity” on the same level as them. This is far from connection with the world, as evidenced by the dissonant, xylophone soundtrack that clashes against the scene. Finally, Kit’s arms, suspended in the air, make him appear as a scarecrow, material and hollow (the image mocks Christ-crucifixion iconography; Kit is no martyr). When Kit turns to walk back toward the camera, Malick pulls out wide, highlighting even more his smallness as Holly’s voice-over kicks in: “We lived in utter loneliness, neither here nor there.”

But this solitude only *recalls* Emersonian self-recovery—Holly and Kit cannot accomplish it. The pair is so emotionally and morally inept that the soul-giving powers of nature do not reveal anything to them. In his various mocked representations of paradise, Malick communicates the failed quest for Emersonian transcendence via two characters whose actions and speech reveal their spiritual failings. This characteristic also takes shape in Malick’s use of detached, limited voiceover narration, a defining feature of his early work.

Ironic Voices

In *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* the young female tag-along recounts events from some indeterminate point in the future. But rather than serving as fully dependable guides, both voices are at times confusing, unreliable, or contradictory to on-screen information. Appropriately, in the history of voice-over narration, film sound scholar Michel Chion claims that the 1970s was the first decade where films began to substantively “doubt” their narrators’ impressions of events.⁵⁸ In the case of *Badlands*, Holly’s voice-over narration, “an odd amalgam of romantic clichés, dime-novel pieties, fervent convictions, and spacey reasonings,”⁵⁹ catches viewers off-guard with its deadpan tone and unstable relationship to Malick’s imagery. Because voice-over is foregrounded in Malick’s work, and because much of my argument for Malick’s Emersonian evolution rests on his use of the technique, a quick explanation of voice-over with regard to the creation of irony is in order.

In her book *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film*, Sarah Kozloff argues that cinematic voice-over differs from literary narration in its ability to craft irony. In film, voice-over occurs simultaneous to imagery, whereas a literary narrator’s remarks “perforce come before or after the instance to which he or she refers.”⁶⁰ Also, literary narration involves just one system—language—whereas voice-over plays against a range of visual and aural signifiers (music, lighting, camera position, etc.) that can either confirm,

complicate, or refute the voice. The process of determining how the two different tracks of information—voice and image—correspond or conflict is a tricky and subjective matter, but Kozloff explains a continuous system in which the tracks sometimes overlap literally (as when a voice describes exactly what’s happening on screen), augment each other’s meaning (such as pointing out information connected to an image but not able to be readily visualized), or show outright disparity or contradiction (when a voice tells something incongruous to an image’s information).

To produce ironic narrators, filmmakers use two strategies. One is “to keep the connection between the image-maker [director] and the narrator tight, to maintain the illusion that the narrator is the presenter of the entire film...but give this narrator an ironic temperament.”⁶¹ Certain narrators, self-conscious of the image-maker’s ultimate control over the on-screen images, interact with visuals to produce sarcastic or poignant commentary. Such strategies include understatement (downplaying the severity of something on-screen), over-inflation (using exaggerative hyperbole), or strict correspondence (in which narration purposefully aligns too closely with the visual for humorous effect). The other strategy is to make the narrator himself unreliable, that is, “a victim of the image-maker’s irony.”⁶² This unfolds as a series of “clashes between narration and scenic presentation to compromise the narrator and to break the viewer’s provisional belief in that narrator’s responsibility for the text.”⁶³ Into this category

Kozloff places both Holly in *Badlands* and Linda in *Days of Heaven* (though she does distinguish them in some ways). Both films perpetuate irony by opening up distance between the image track (what we see) and the narration track (what we hear).

Kozloff argues that Holly, for example, is figured as “naïve or limited” in contrast to incorrect or misleading. In a scene showing Kit feeding cattle (a decidedly unromantic image), Holly’s voice-over says:

Kit went to work in the feedlot, while I carried on with my studies. Little by little we fell in love. As I’d never been popular in school and didn’t have a lot of personality, I was surprised that he took such a liking to me, especially when he could have had any other girl in town if he’d given it half a try.

“Holly isn’t lying,” Kozloff asserts, “she’s just completely limited by her clichés, and innocently blind to Kit’s craziness. The visuals don’t contradict her statements, they just highlight their inappropriateness...”⁶⁴ We might label this *tonal dissonance* in which Holly does not misrepresent anything necessarily, but still produces a sense of naïve disconnect (at the very least it undermines the loving nature of the relationship). Another example of this occurs when Holly says she and Kit “mostly got along fine and made love” in their forest hideout, but this is followed immediately by a cut to Holly announcing: “One of the chickens died last night” while Kit shaves—an edit that jars against Holly’s voice-over.

I agree with Kozloff’s general analysis here, but elsewhere Malick more actively subverts Holly’s trustworthiness. During the car journey across the

plains, Holly reports: “Kit told me to enjoy the scenery, which I did,” but this is followed immediately by a cut inside their Cadillac where she is not “enjoying the scenery” but reading aloud from a Hollywood gossip magazine (a characterization of superficiality brought home ironically by voice-over disconnect). At other times, Holly’s voice-over describes physical impossibilities. During their drive across the plains, Holly reports: “That night, we could see the gas fires of Missoula and the lights of Cheyenne.” But this is nonsensical given the hundreds of miles gap between these two locations—Holly is either mistaken or hyperbolic. Her innocence is true and real, but we can only excuse it so much. However, there are rare moments when the film transcends her ironic voice-over and expresses an Emersonian spirituality which leads to brief revelations of the soul. One in particular is worth close reading.

A Flash of Transcendence

The philosophical qualities of *Badlands* are mostly subdued, but the film retains as a theme “the impulse to pierce life’s mysteries and assert one’s place in a preordained future,”⁶⁵ as Michaels puts it. Such curiosities of the soul, however, exclusively involve Holly. One example occurs shortly after the couple establishes their forest hideout. Up until this point, Holly has been a complicit—if dispassionate—accomplice to Kit’s escapade. But an ordinary event imbued with transcendent significance momentarily alters her perspective; she moves beyond

recording events with banal observations and instead articulates self-conscious thoughts akin to Emerson's inward thinking.

The sequence begins with an objective long-shot shot of Holly pensively stepping along a shallow river bed, a rare moment of isolation in nature. The image switches to a later point: we see Holly's subjective view of a deer wandering through high grass, and then the camera switches to the front, viewing her as she lowers a pair of binoculars. Over this she professes a new-found sensitivity to nature:

I grew to love the forest. The cooing of the doves and the hum of dragonflies in the air made it always seem lonesome, like everybody's dead and gone. When the leaves rustled overhead it was like the spirits were whispering about all the little things that bothered them.

Key here is that we as spectators are granted Holly's point-of-view at this moment: elsewhere in the film Malick rarely synthesizes the spectator's gaze with characters' perspectives. But Holly's voice-over, newly appreciative of the world, dictates a new perspective for the audience—we share her view of the deer strolling through the woods, and then gain the knowledge that we are sharing that perspective during the eye-line match shot. The use of composer Carl Orff's piece *Gassenhauer*, meanwhile, lends the scene an innocently happy quality. Holly appears to have connected with nature to some degree.

But in a move that characterizes the film's tonal ambiguities, Malick switches to a visual that does not correspond narratively or emotionally to Holly's

voice-over. We cut to an objective shot of Kit lounging in the couple's makeshift tree house, sporting his garish cowboy boots and hat. He munches on an apple while looking at a National Geographic Magazine. Holly's voice-over connotes soulful thinking, whereas Kit appears juvenile and empty: he cocks his neck to view the magazine, giggles (probably ogling some bare-breasted tribeswomen common to National Geographic), instinctively looks around to check that nobody is watching (something a teenager would do with found pornography), and casually tosses away his apple core. Some critics argue that the juxtaposition of Kit's behavior and Holly's voice-over undercuts the seriousness of this moment. Though I agree that the visual of Kit creates tonal dissonance when set against Holly's narration, this only highlights Holly's appreciation of nature in stark contrast to Kit's mockery of it. The resultant cut to the following sequence supports my faith in her genuine, though momentary, revelation.

We cut to Holly using a small hand-held device called a stereopticon, a rudimentary tool for viewing visual slides. As Holly loads a picture onto it, Malick makes a match cut: Holly adjusts the arm of the stereopticon, and the camera then switches to her view as the first image (a tree-laden canal in Rio de Janeiro) moves into focus. We are again firmly aligned with her perspective. The subsequent photos bear no direct relationship to one another: the Sphinx in Egypt, construction of the Panama Canal, a handful of domestic parlor shots, and finally an image of a soldier kissing a meek woman on her cheek. But they are

nonetheless visions of the wider world that stir in Holly a sustained moment of self-realization:

One day while taking a look at some vistas in dad's stereopticon, 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. If my mom had never met my dad. If she'd never died. And what's the man I'm gonna marry look like? What's he doing right this minute? Is he thinking about me now, by some coincidence, even though he doesn't know me? Does it show on his face?'

In this instance Holly expresses self-awareness that previously eluded her completely. The photographic images of life remind her of her own mortality.

That this moment "hits her" during a relatively quotidian event underscores the ubiquitous nature of transcendence that informs our daily experiences. In his essay "Circles," Emerson conceives of revelations as surprises to our beings. That is, if we went consciously searching for revelations, we could not find them. "Life is a series of surprises," he writes. "We do not guess to-day the mood, the pleasure, the power of tomorrow, when we are building up our being. Of lower states,--the acts of routine and sense,--we can tell somewhat; but the masterpieces of God, the total growths and universal movements of the soul, he hideth; they are incalculable."⁶⁶Holly, likewise, experiences her revelation by doing nothing more than looking at images in a hand-held tool.

Something crucial occurs in the final image of the stereopticon series. As Holly fantasizes about her future husband, the frame pauses on the

aforementioned image of a soldier kissing a woman. At this point Malick zooms in on the female's face. This differs fundamentally from the "zoom-in" Holly performed seconds earlier by adjusting the stereopticon arm: one shot mimics Holly's physical maneuvering, the other is a cinematic focusing of our attention on something Holly ponders subjectively. This meshing of perspectives—Holly's and ours—signals a transcendent moment that is mediated through a device which functions precisely to see things more clearly, to bring life closer for inspection. It should also not be lost that the term "vista" can refer either to a distant view of a landscape (Holly's device), or as an "an extensive mental view (as over a stretch of time or a series of events)."⁶⁷ Holly sees beyond her physical presence in the world through the integrity of her mind.

Michaels misses the significance of the sequence when he says Holly's "fanciful musings [in the scene] suggest only vacuity, her profound out-of-it-ness,"⁶⁸ rather than any sort of revelation. But what Holly says next reinforces her lament at being stuck with Kit when she could be living life on her own terms: "For days afterward I lived in dread. Sometimes I wished I could fall asleep and be taken off to some magical land—this never happened." Having been prompted by the vistas in the stereopticon to question her temporal existence, Holly now explicitly wishes she had never met Kit, and would instead be "taken off to some magical land." She hopes to transcend her life and lives "in dread" of what might happen to her (because she now appreciates life, her potential future, the wider

world). But, crucially, Holly lacks the moral fortitude to affect change. She speaks her final line over a shot of Kit lethargically dragging his fishing net through the river, unable to catch anything (a suiting image to Holly's melancholy narration). Perhaps this is the difference between Holly and Malick's later characters that also recognize the need to rise above one's material circumstances through self-recovery: Holly ultimately lacks the resolve to right moral action that would make her a spiritually whole person. She wants her "magical land," but can't bring it about herself.

The film's ending makes a final ironic gesture toward a failed paradise. Malick constructs the finale as a parodic commentary on the celebrity Kit desires throughout the film. Handcuffed, he basks in his new-found notoriety, tossing personal items out to soldiers surrounding him in a military base hangar. He is the center of attention and appears at ease. "Boy, we sure rang the bell, didn't we?" he smirks at Holly before being boarded onto the plane where, in a piece of dialogue that crystallizes his peculiar self, he asks the state trooper where he got his hat. "Boy, I'd like to get me one of them." Kit is so unformed as a person, so dependent on physical emblems of identification, that he now is fascinated with yet another physical signifier of a separate identity (one that represents the other side of the law). The final image, of a heavenly sky opening up to the plane, represents an ironic ascension, not a meaningful realization of spiritual paradise.

In his next film, Malick drops the irony completely and foregrounds the tragic dimensions of failed Emersonian transcendence.

Days of Heaven

Malick's second feature also depicts a runaway couple's quest to find a better world. But what *Badlands* implies ironically about this search—that is it futile if one neglects the spirit—*Days of Heaven* foregrounds tragically in a Biblical-style parable about the fallen state of Man. Specifically, the film is structured around class-consciousness: the central couple fixes their sights on escaping lives of migrant labor by exploiting a rich farmer's ailing health, establishing another scene for Malick to play out the fundamental conflict between spiritual and physical modes of living.

The film is set in Wilsonian America near the country's entrance into World War I, what scholar Carole Zucker calls "a time of unparalleled technical innovation and swiftly enacted industrialization,"⁶⁹ and the country's final era of isolationist innocence. Bill (Richard Gere), his girlfriend Abby (Brooke Adams), and Bill's younger sister, Linda (Linda Manz), a trio of migrants, flee from Chicago after Bill assaults (maybe inadvertently kills) his factory foreman. Via train they find work on Texan wheat property owned by a rich farmer (Sam Shepherd) whose Victorian-style mansion towers over the otherwise desolate plains. Bill and Abby pose as brother and sister to avoid trouble, and are initially

glad for work sacking wheat, but soon tire of the arduous conditions. The farmer notices Abby and takes romantic interest in her, which Bill encourages after he overhears news of the farmer's ailing health, hoping to cash in on the inheritance. Abby and the farmer wed, granting the migrants access to a higher quality of life.

But the farmer's health does not decline as expected, snaring Abby between blossoming feelings for her new husband and lingering love for Bill. At one point Bill leaves the farm, sensing Abby's wavering emotions, but returns to attempt reconciliation. The farmer, however, discovers the truth; during a locust outbreak, he attacks Bill, starting a fire that destroys the wheat crop in apocalyptic fashion. Bill accidentally kills the farmer in a resultant skirmish, grabs Abby and Linda, and flees. But the farmer's foreman raises a posse which tracks down and kills Bill. Again rootless, Abby sticks Linda in a boarding school (which she escapes from in the film's final sequence), while she herself boards a troop train on the way to war, hoping to make amends for her prior moral failings.

To literalize his theme of failed paradise, Malick frames *Days of Heaven* as a lesson about lost Eden. The very title, referring to the tenuous and temporary happiness found on the farm, derives from Deuteronomy in the Bible, in which Moses passes along God's commandment to the Israelites "so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them as long as the days of heaven are above the earth." This allusion supports what is clearly the film's narrative emulation of a Biblical

parable. Early on, a migrant soothsayer warns Linda that “the whole earth is going up in flames,” that “people are gonna be screaming and animals are gonna be running.” Linda regards this as an impending moral reckoning: “You see, the people that’ve been good are gonna go to Heaven and escape all that fire. But if you’ve been bad, God don’t even hear you.”

Within the dialogue and via visuals, the film returns to this theme consistently, as if the characters are role-players in a predetermined fate. Hell-like iconography (in the factory, the night-time reverie, and the climactic field fire), punishments for human misbehaviors (the locusts which descend precisely when the farmer discovers the ruse against him), and bits of Linda’s voice-over (“I think the devil was on the farm”; “People got both bad and good in them”) all frame the story as a tale of moral failure. Entering into the wheat farm for the first time, the migrants pass under a conspicuously placed gateway arch (Heaven’s gate?). Malick performs a slow-moving crane shot that tracks the procession of wagons, horses, and people into the property, marking their transference onto the sublimely beautiful land. Near the end of the film, after the farmer’s death and the wheat crop fire, Bill, Abby, and Linda again pass through the arch on their way out, though now it is charred and falling apart—a suitable image for the collapse of paradise.

Class Act

But why is paradise lost? Ultimately, because of characters' class-consciousness (in lieu of self-consciousness). Unlike *Badlands*, which buries its characters' motivations in cryptic dialogue and puzzling interactions, *Days of Heaven* shows that Bill and Abby con the farmer because they (understandably) want something better than itinerant labor for low wages. The migrants in the film, though romantically photographed and given pretty musical accompaniment at some points, live in a time "when the large East and West coast cities became the power bases in the U.S., alienating middle America, engendering the sense of rootlessness and disenfranchisement that are one of the signal attributes of apocalyptic fiction."⁷⁰ Bill and Abby's quest falls in line with countless others of this epoch whose laborious lives defined their day-to-day concerns.

For instance, Abby, in trying to justify to Linda her plan to stay on the farm, recounts a childhood spent rolling cigars until her hands were worn. "It ain't always gonna be this way," Bill tries to comfort her. But he too seems disillusioned with the American Dream. During a scene in which the migrant workers relax and play games during a break, Bill noticeably isolates himself from the group and looks disgusted with his lot in life. Linda observes: "He was tired of living like the rest of them, nosing around like a pig in the gutter. He wasn't in the mood no more. He figured there must have been something wrong with them. The way they always got no luck, and they ought to get it straightened

up.” Film scholar Stuart Kendall rightly points out that these images of boisterous laborers, in contrast to Bill’s demeanor, “[suggest] that we are meant to condemn Bill’s dissatisfaction, his ultimately fatal ambition for a better life, even though that ambition is the essence of the American dream.”⁷¹ In conversation with the farmer (the opposite end of the class spectrum), he confides his frustration: “So I went to work in a mill. I couldn’t wait to get in there. Began at 7:00. Got a smile on my face. Then one day you wake up and you find you’re not the smartest guy in the world. Never gonna come up with the big score. When I was growing up I thought I really would.” Bill’s big score, it turns out, is to encourage Abby to marry the sick farmer in order to “trade up,” a material ambition that brings about tragic results.

The film’s attention to class is elsewhere pronounced by Malick’s compositions and shot structure. When the workers arrive at the farm, Malick edits the sequence to express the hierarchical gulf between owner and workers. The farmer’s house is introduced in a low angle wide shot as the farmer emerges in the doorway. At this point he is a distant, indistinct figure. Cutting to the workers jumping off trucks, Malick collects the migrants in the foreground as the house dominates in the far background. “Whose place is that?” Abby asks. “That’s the owner’s,” the foreman responds. “Don’t none of you go up around there either.” Though only a white dot in the far depth of the shot, the farmer’s dominance over his workers—and the class divide governing the film—is clear.

Bill's coveting of the farmer's wealth is likewise visible through shots of Bill gazing at the house from afar (at first the object of his desire and then the object of lovesickness when he realizes he's lost Abby to the farmer). What Bill wants is the very stability and privilege the house represents in contrast to his own rootlessness and hardship. Bill's stroll through the house's interior,⁷² for example, is constructed as a meaningful moment of (what he believes) is his transference into an upper echelon. Malick's mobile camera follows Bill through doorways and rooms as he peers at items in the home, but added still shots of portraits and a wine decanter with glasses point out Bill's fascination with the farmer's material wealth. As these migrants transform into wealthy dwellers, as their dress and decorum improve, and as they waste food on food fights, Linda takes stock of their new circumstances: "We'd never been this rich, alright? I mean, we were just all of a sudden living like kings. Just nothing to do all day but crack jokes, lay around. We didn't have to work. I'm telling you the rich got it figured out."

Though as the film points out, achieving wealth at the expense of moral collapse does not go unpunished. It is no mistake that Bill, on the run, is pointed out to authorities by upper-class day-trippers on the riverbank; his death occurs scrambling through the water like a desperate animal, while the very social class he aspired to belong to twirls umbrellas and takes in his death like a weekend amusement. Heaven comes with a price.

A Nowhere Paradise

Like *Badlands*, Malick's second film suggests a world tinged with sublimity and transcendence, but also devoid of ultimate utopia. It helps to approach the film through a binary between nature and technology (and how Malick collapses the two). In *Days of Heaven*, nature is noticeably romanticized in comparison to the ironic distancing in *Badlands*. Remarking on Malick's fondness for beautiful compositions of sunsets, white clouds, or oceans of wheat, Woessner says that *Days of Heaven* makes "it difficult to discern whether the images of the natural world are secondary to the story of Bill, Abby, and the farmer, or if they are in fact the primary focus of the film itself."⁷³ Woessner's remark anticipates a common criticism of Malick's later work, which is that he favors beautiful natural phenomena at the expense of characterization and plot (a point I will return to in chapter two).

The picture has been cited as one of the most beautiful ever produced. Natural light, in particular, is employed to give *Days of Heaven* a memorably heavenly look. Much has been made of cinematographer Nestor Almendros' use of "magic hour" cinematography, referring to the precious few minutes between sunset and darkness when the sky casts a delicate softness that blackens faces and frames in stark silhouettes. This was a precise visual technique Malick insisted on, according to Almendros in his memoir *A Man with a Camera*:

As a general rule, nature's most beautiful light occurs at extreme moments, the very moments when filming seems impossible... At Malick's insistence certain parts of the film were made at what he calls the 'magic hour,' that is, the time between sunset and nightfall... For these few minutes the light is truly magical, because no one knows where it is coming from. The sun is not to be seen, but the sky can be bright, and the blue atmosphere undergoes strange mutations.⁷⁴

Such a lighting style also presages Malick's later work, which features gorgeous shots of sunsets, treetops, and wheat fields in the wind, hinting at mystical qualities to the earth. Taking this point to its philosophical roots, Orr claims that such lighting "reinvents the sublime photographically... and in so doing invokes Emerson's transcendentalist philosophy"⁷⁵ in that the natural world contains suggestions of higher existence beyond the utility of nature's resources. Migrant workers are bathed in soft purple light and accompanied by Ennio Morricone's majestic score, which constructs the wheat fields as a harmonious space full of potential. And Malick's well-documented use of microphotography (extreme close-ups of minute details) fetishizes the intricateness of the earth, such as when his camera journeys underneath the soil to capture a time-lapsed series of a stalk of wheat beginning to grow. This is the first Malick film where nature comes alive.

But lest we think he glorifies nature absolutely, Malick at various points collapses the distinction between nature and technology as if to suggest a false separation of the spaces where paradise may exist. *Days of Heaven* is very much about the agrarian country's transition into mechanization. The turn-of-the-

century photographs that open the film combine shots of urban labor and domestic parlor shots with vistas of natural landmarks, foregrounding the tension of encroaching technological Modernism on traditional agrarian lifestyles that typified Wilsonian America. The opening steel mill sequence, for example, is a grimy portrait of urban factory work. Malick punctuates its dehumanizing effect by amplifying sounds of clanging steel and churning engines, fusing them with the inaudible voices of Bill and the foreman as they argue. He reapplies this technique later during the wheat field sequences in which huge black tractors and threshers churn across the plains, dominating the frame, scattering small animals and overwhelming the soundtrack. But not only machines create havoc: the locust outbreak is presented as similarly destructive. Malick again plays with the soundtrack, amplifying the noises of the insects devouring the wheat to the point that their noises overwhelm our hearing. The microphotography of the locusts eating the wheat further intensifies the sequence.

Malick builds parallels between nature and technology in other ways. The fire that engulfs the farmer's wheat is a bookend with the Chicago mill fires, and the wildlife scattered by the flames in the wheat field recall prior images of threshers startling small animals. The farmer's house, a beautiful structure, retains eyesore qualities on the barren landscape, its churning windmill atop a roof a constant presence. And there is a curious scene in which the farmer reclines on a

sofa set in his wheat field as he discusses finances with his accountant (a portrait of indoor culture spreading outward).

The sum effect of such combinations of technology with nature rebuffs any notion that characters can find solace in the physical world. As Martin Donaghue says, “If this demi-paradise seemed at first defined as a place by its opposition to corrupt east and north, any such limits are directions are now to dissolve, which only goes to show that utopia is quite properly nowhere.”⁷⁶Water, especially, functions in contradictory ways: it is linked with scenes of both physical cleansing and moral lapses, wonderfully evoked when Bill washes Abby’s feet in a stream whilst they decide to deceive the farmer. It is no mistake that, during this tryst, Bill drops a glass from the farmer’s house into the water (the same glass he previously leered at in the house); Malick’s camera cuts away to the glass in close-up resting on the river bed, marking this as the moment where material ambitions set in motion spiritual downfalls. Malick has in mind a circular reckoning when Bill is killed in the same waterway he and Abby concocted their plan. He captures Bill’s death by placing the camera underneath the water looking up as his face careens into it, a tragic visualization of the Fall.

Days of Heaven is again framed by a young female’s voice-over. Here the narrator is Linda: she is the conveyor of the film’s Biblical theme and general commentator on events. Like Holly in *Badlands*, Linda works against on-screen information through several tonal dissonances (such as when she says she and her

brother are “always running off on adventures, searching for something” while we see the trio blatantly running from the law to board a train). Call it youth or naiveté, but Linda “often works as a counterpoint to the romance story line, and sometimes in contrast to the visual track of the film.”⁷⁷ One example of this—and of the class-consciousness that overwhelms communion with nature—is the sequence in which Linda speaks: “I got to like this farm. Do anything I want. Roll in the fields. Talk to the wheat patches. When I was sleeping they’d talk to me. They’d go in my dreams.” But this supposed kinship with nature is spoken over decidedly different images: Bill, Abby, and Linda waste food in a food fight, and then the trio play golf in a mowed out portion of the wheat field. At best, this is a severe case of tonal discord; at worst, Linda is misleading or mistaken—she only likes *being rich* on the farm, not necessarily the farm itself.

At the same time, critics have seen Linda’s voice-over as the beginning of Malick’s transition to his later poetic use of the technique. Her voice, for one thing, feels more immediate and rich in detail. Actress Linda Manz’s heavy Chicago accent—complete with authentic stutters—aligns it more with Malick’s later narrators in its emotional and dynamic timbre, than with Holly’s monotone aloofness in *Badlands* where she speaks as if reciting a scripted fairytale. And though Linda’s perspective is childlike, she expresses moral awareness about adult situations, a quality that makes her “preternaturally wise.”⁷⁸ For example, she seems in tune to the farmer’s inner emotions, saying of his infatuation with

Linda: “The farmer—he didn’t know it when he first saw her. Maybe it was the way the wind blew through her hair.” In other moments, she expresses sympathy for the farmer’s plight while criticizing broader society. Again, of the farmer: “Wasn’t no harm in him. You give him a flower, he’d keep it forever. He was headed for the boneyard any minute, but he wasn’t really goin’ around squawking about it like some people. In one way I felt sorry for him. Cause he had nobody to stand out for him, be by his side, hold his hand when he needed attention or somethin’. That’s touchin’.” Some of her voice-over resembles moral philosophy (“You only live on this earth once, and in my opinion, as long as you’re around you outta have it nice”), albeit channeled through a child’s diction.

Like *Badlands*, *Days of Heaven* ends on a subtly pessimistic note. Linda breaks out of the boarding school and meets up with “the makin’s girl,” an older teenage worker from the farm. This friend mentions a boyfriend now gone for war, but she seems ignorant (or insensitive) to the impending doom of the war: “I don’t know. Maybe he’ll get killed or something,” she says. The aimless pair begins wandering down the tracks (the same tracks shuttling men to war), while Linda’s voice-over leaves viewers with a curiously inconclusive note: “This girl, she didn’t know where she was going or what she was doing. I was hoping things would work out for her. She was a good friend of mine.” We doubt that things work out for any of the characters.

The figures in Malick's first two films emphasize their material lives over spiritual cultivation, and the results are deadly. In keeping with other Hollywood Renaissance films of the 1970s, *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* depict the difficulty of locating paradise, either physically or of the soul. The overt philosophizing that defines Malick's later work is only tangentially present here. Perhaps Malick is experimenting with different narrative forms and tones (the ironic road movie, the Biblical parable) on his way to fleshing out his more extreme contemplative cinema. It would be twenty years before observers found this out.

Chapter Two

Man is a stream whose source is hidden.

--Emerson's "The Over-Soul"⁷⁹

One Big Soul: *The Thin Red Line*

Uncertainty swirls around what Malick was up to during his twenty-year hiatus from filmmaking after *Days of Heaven* in 1978. Most accounts have him jetting between Texas (his home), Los Angeles, and Paris, researching and pitching to studios potential new projects (including Jerry Lee Lewis and Che Guevara biopics). He also dabbled in producing and script writing, but gave no interviews and generally kept a low profile. His reclusiveness became all the more pronounced when many of his contemporaries (Coppola, Scorsese, Altman) continued to produce big-name projects, basking in celebrity. Malick's prolonged silence and shyness, while shielding him from mainstream fame, only raised interest around his esoteric personality and future films. Malick the Hollywood Renaissance wunderkind became the JD Salinger of contemporary American cinema.

Clearer than Malick's activities during this period is the increased philosophical sensibility of the film that broke his prolonged silence. In 1998 he released his highly anticipated third feature, *The Thin Red Line*, a World War II epic centering on American soldiers fighting in the Battle of Guadalcanal. Based on James Jones' celebrated novel, the picture stirred vast interest. Critics were

itchy to see Malick' long-awaited return, and a bevy of A-list actors—including Sean Penn, George Clooney, and Nick Nolte—further heightened curiosity, as did a national climate newly infused with World War II infatuation owing to Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and Tom Brokaw's book *The Greatest Generation*, published that same year.

What audiences got was not standard war film fare, however. Malick's film is an unquestionable stylistic departure from his early work and a stirring metaphysical experience, saturated as much in soldiers' introspection on existence as it is the blood-and-guts realism of Pacific-theater combat. Narrative cohesion and linearity, the stuff of classical Hollywood cinema, take a back seat to heavily stylized voice-overs and attention to the visual grandeur of nature, which Malick imbues with mystic qualities. And a thematic emphasis on salvation, mortality, and transcendence lingers far beyond the roar of gunfire. If Malick's films from the '70s represented gentle philosophical meditations on the lives of his characters in a pessimistic New Hollywood context, *The Thin Red Line* pulled Malick into a more contemplative frame where his philosophical sensibility became paramount to understanding him as an auteur.

Though reviews of *The Thin Red Line* often downplay its plot, favoring instead Malick's newly developed aesthetic, the film centers—however obliquely—around a traditional war film schema: men on a mission. The film follows several soldiers through the unfolding Guadalcanal conflict, at the time

thought to be the turning point in the Pacific. Charlie Company must storm a hill heavily embedded with Japanese forces, an order coming from the careerist Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte) against the wishes of the company's captain, Staros (Elias Kosteas). Tall and Staros often clash over the colonel's ambitious (but pointless and deadly) decision to carry out a frontal assault rather than Staros' flanking idea, a dispute that ultimately leads to Staros' dismissal. At stake are the men of the company, whose experiences and memories thread through the film and form the basis of its contemplative and spiritual qualities: the tensions between a disobedient private named Witt (Jim Caviezel) and his by-the-book sergeant, Welsh (Sean Penn); a lovesick infantryman, Bell (Ben Chaplin), whose memories of his wife spur frequent narrative flashbacks; and the challenged machismo of cocky rifleman Doll (Dash Mihok) as he experiences both cowardice and bloodlust, are only a few of these personal subplots. The company eventually takes the Japanese camp and secures the hill, but at a high physical and spiritual cost. The film ends with Charlie Company's transport sailing away from the island, now ferrying very changed men.

In contrast to *Saving Private Ryan*, which stands as a model of mainstream Hollywood storytelling, *The Thin Red Line* meanders through characters' contemplative thoughts on war and nature's majestic indifference to human suffering. Spielberg's film depicts wartime heroism and patriotism built around a strictly defined ideological message and narrative goal (the film is bookended by

images of a transparent American flag waving triumphantly in the wind, and the film's tagline, referring to the plot to save Private Ryan, reads "The mission is a man"). Malick's film, meanwhile, subordinates historical or patriotic concerns to philosophical ruminations formed from individual experiences of the war. For example, there is little in the way of time-period placement, no ideological speeches about American ideals or superiority, and very few Xs and Os explanations of the battlefield layout or the wider importance of Guadalcanal, a brief exception being General Quintard's (John Travolta) pitch to his staff about their mission aboard a warship. Though expertly crafted battle sequences come and go (it is, after all, a war film), the film's soulful core clearly lays elsewhere. The personal conflicts between Witt/Welsh and Tall/Staros feature more prominently than the war between nations, making the point that large-scale violence is rooted in basic interpersonal questions of moral righteousness (itself a very Emersonian theme—only through the inquisition and transformation of the individual can society hope to reform). Further, composed shots of nature, particularly birds, trees, sunlight, and jungle animals, as well as natural sounds of grass, wind, and water, strongly compliment and sometimes override the human conflicts playing out, while meditative voice-overs cast a spiritual net over the physical realities we view onscreen.

Philosopher and film scholar Simon Critchley argues that Malick's film is a war film "in the same way that Homer's *Iliad* is a war poem. The viewer

seeking verisimilitude and documentation of historical fact will be disappointed.”⁸⁰ Malick is instead interested in the internal struggle to conceive of a world that contains extreme cruelty and extreme love, as well as humans’ relationship to nature. The physical, external, nationalized Spielberg war film becomes the metaphysical, internal, individuated war film in Malick’s hands, a quality referenced in the film’s perceptive tagline: “Every man fights his own war,” alluding to the inner self-consciousness that forms the basis of the film’s philosophical approach.

In this vein I pose links between *The Thin Red Line* and Emersonian philosophy. Malick’s film favors not the material body of war, as countless war films before and after, but the transcendent soul and its collective, connective fabric. The most pertinent elements here are the film’s expressive use of voice-over, which weaves together multiple, indeterminate present-tense perspectives to form Malick’s “voice-over-soul,” that is, a web of identities separated physically but connected spiritually via the film’s construction of voices. The other subject of this chapter is the ideological tension between Witt and Welsh, who represent the strain between Emersonian transcendence and grim war-time realism. Private Witt emerges as an Emersonian hero; he achieves revelation from war through an act of sacrificial selflessness and a sublime connection with nature.

Voice-over-soul

The Thin Red Line exemplifies what Michaels sees as Malick's two signature qualities: "the grandiose representation of nature and the distinctive employment of subjective voiceover narration."⁸¹ To begin with voice-over, both of Malick's earlier films are narrated by an individual female child from some point in the future, casting events in the past tense. Holly's and Linda's voices, though often literally or at least tonally contradictory to the visuals, generally exist to explain narrative events. But in his twenty-year hiatus from the cinema, Malick reworked his voice-overs to make more overt philosophical messages. *The Thin Red Line* features no fewer than ten different voices speaking from an ethereal present-tense. Heavily accented and rich in texture, they sometimes are not clearly attached to on-screen characters, and while occasionally clarifying narrative back stories (such as when Colonel Tall muses about brownnosing to generals for career advancement), they function more as fragments of inquisitive or contemplative thought rather than strict exposition. I count at least twenty different questions spoken by at least ten different characters engaging a range of existential mysteries, a sample of which is cataloged below:

What's this war at the heart of nature?
 Why does nature vie with itself, the land contend with the sea?
 Is there an avenging power in nature—not one power, but two?
 Why should I be afraid to die?
 Who are you who live in all these many forms?
 Does our ruin benefit the earth?
 Is this darkness in you too?

Have you passed through this night?

The multiple voice-over questions do more than lend the film a poetic air—they establish a lineage with Emerson in their attempts to get at essential truths about the human condition and underline the ultimate difficulty of grasping such knowledge, what the philosopher calls a “residuum [man] could not resolve.”⁸² Emerson’s writings are full of existential questions. The opening paragraph of “The Over-Soul” contains a series designed as challenges to the empiricist’s faith that lived experience can explain everything. Emerson wants to dig deeper to the underlying spiritual source of life imbued in all things: “We grant that life is mean, but how did we find out that it was mean? What is the ground of this uneasiness of ours; of this old discontent?”⁸³ The soldiers similarly want to know the origins of violent emotions and tendencies as a means of coping with the material hell around them.

The film uses another method to express Emersonian questioning. During many sequences, Malick uses a musical motif from American composer Charles Ives called “The Unanswered Question,” a brass and string piece that sustains several dissonant notes without resolving them tonally, resulting in what sounds like an unfinished monologue, an unanswered question. Ives himself was a well-known Transcendentalist composer who greatly admired Emerson and Thoreau.⁸⁴ His music features prominently in the scene where Dale (Arie Verveen) pulls out with pliers the gold teeth of wounded or dead Japanese soldiers. As Dale moves

from body to body, one Japanese hoists himself up to gaze at birds in the sky as Malick turns up Ives, whose dissonant, solitary horn reflects the unknowable origins of Dale's cruelty as well as the wish of the Japanese man to transcend it.

But the many voices are the core of Malick's philosophical film. They hover above and saturate the narrative action, sometimes running over imagery conducive to voice-over, sometimes overriding scenes where diegetic noise normally reigns. For example, the climactic attack on the Japanese camp, though filmed as a gruesome combat sequence with fast-moving Steadicam cinematography and rapid editing, is partially drowned out by a soothing voice asking questions like "Who's doin' this? Who's killin' us?" Later in the film, Bell speaks about his feelings for his home-front wife and the enigmatic nature of love: "Love—where does it come from?" But Bell's voice-over occurs simultaneous to images of an air raid on the newly established American base, complete with large-scale explosions muted on the soundtrack. In the hands of another director, this attack would be a major action sequence; here it is rendered virtually as an aside to the contemplative voice-over, the true star of the film.

One of Malick's broad strategies with his voice-overs is to cast characters within a collective experience while emphasizing individual integrities. Importantly, the voices are often indistinguishable from one another—critics frequently disagree as to who is speaking when. The opening scene is a useful illustration of this, and of Malick's wider fascination with nature. We open on a

close-up of a crocodile cutting through swamp waters before dissolving to Malick's favorite image: low-angle shots of sunlight piercing through trees, a suggestion of what Emerson calls "the perpetual presence of the sublime" in *Nature*.⁸⁵ An unknown man asks a string of questions, and we understand the film's reach beyond the materiality of war: "What's this war at the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself, the land content with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature—not one power but two?"

This particular voice, spoken partially over images of vines ensnaring tree trunks, ponders the inherent duality of nature, a notion Malick extends into human nature at several points, asking how our impulses to love and kill can coexist. Of note here is the nature of the voice itself, a thick southern drawl that resembles others in the film and which returns at similar meditative moments, such as the attack on the Japanese camp as well as the film's ending. Listening very closely (and consulting DVD subtitles for confirmation), we learn this voice belongs to a decidedly minor character, a jittery GI named Train (John Dee Smith) who has but thirty seconds of screen time (he's the boy who interrupts Welsh shaving in the warship). Not one critic I have read cites this voice accurately, instead attributing it to soldiers who feature more prominently, such as Witt or Doll, assuming only major characters have voices in Malick's film.⁸⁶ The final voice-over, for instance, is not (contrary to Power's and others' arguments), spoken by Witt, his voice reaching us from the afterlife, or Doll, whose point of view we

share in watching the churning waters from the warship; rather it is *Train* we hear, who moments before speaks about having “lived plenty of life” even at his young age. “Oh my soul,” he muses, “let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining.” Perhaps this is Train’s way of yearning for the transcendence Witt found earlier, an appeal to the soul as a means of coping with the hell he’s been through. He wants to merge with his soul, and the Ideal contained within, in order to see “all things shining,” the way the Divine made them. The fact that three different characters are potentially implicated in this final moment—Witt, Doll, and Train, the voice’s true owner—collapses the barriers between individuals in their mutual appeals to the film’s Over-Soul. Train’s voice, which opens and closes the film, makes him the movie’s representative of humanity whose experiences stand in for our collective existence.

Another example of vocal ambiguity involves the scene with the dirt-covered face of a dead Japanese soldier. As Malick’s camera lingers on the face (which Witt looks at in quiet reverence), a voice rises: “Are you righteous? Kind? Does your confidence lie in this? Are you loved by all? Know that I was, too. Do you imagine your sufferings will be less because you loved goodness, truth?” Again there is confusion about where the voice, a raspy whisper, comes from. Though tempting to ascribe it to the dead soldier on screen, there’s no denying that it sounds curiously like Captain Staros, who is not immediately involved in

the scene. Malick has used voice-over either as a means for the dead to speak to us (and, spiritually, to Witt) or for a major character with no direct presence in the scene to enter its aural frame. Both options create a sense of porousness as to where voices are allowed to originate in the film. According to producer Grant Hill in a DVD commentary, Malick intentionally muddled voices together in order to collapse the divisions between his characters, blurring the many into a singular whole.⁸⁷

Malick's use of ambiguous, ethereal voice-overs demonstrates a very Emersonian aspect of the film: his ability to favor subjectivity while at the same time collapsing the divides between individuals. In "The Over-Soul," Emerson sees the soul not merely as a personal possession, but an "eternal ONE" "within which each man's particular being is contained and made one with the other."⁸⁸ By amending the word "soul" to "over-soul," Robinson explains, Emerson kept focus on the individual's capacity for spirituality, but extended its meaning to a more universal orientation.⁸⁹ In other words, our souls are both personal, and threads in a wider circuitry of life. Thus in Malick's film, while individual voices linger alone in the ether, attending to personal inner wars or questions, their similarly ruminative natures fasten them together in a broader "voice-over-soul." Chion phrases it well when he says "...these voices that are closed to each other at the same time combine into the modulated meditations of a single collective consciousness... In the logic of the film, it is out of extreme human isolation and

insularity (each man is an island) that ‘together-ness’ can emerge.”⁹⁰ We are all of us fundamentally disconnected from others no matter our physical proximity, yet our mutual spiritual origination casts us all in the same “eternal ONE.”

Such a rendering of the innate spiritual closeness of all living things marks a new twist on the typical “bands of brotherhood” depictions of the war genre, exemplified in *Saving Private Ryan* and Spielberg’s later HBO series, *Bands of Brothers*. In those versions, male relationships are formed through dependency on others during war and the masculine rituals that unite men far from home. In Malick’s film, these material bonds are subordinated to the notion that the soul imbued in all life is the ultimate connective element. This point is brought home conclusively by Witt, who, walking amongst wounded fellow soldiers, ponders: “Maybe all men got one big soul where everybody’s a part of. All faces are the same man, one big self. Everyone looking for salvation by himself, each like a coal drawn from the fire.” Witt directly paraphrases Emerson’s “The Over-Soul” here, looking to channel his Transcendentalist ethos of spiritual unity despite the fractured world around him.

The Emersonian Hero

Witt’s comment betrays his status as the film’s soulful center, the character Malick imbues with the potential for spiritual transcendence that makes him an Emersonian hero. In an article tracking Malick’s adaptation of James’ source novel, literary scholar Jimmie Cain demonstrates how much Witt is a

specifically Malickian construct.⁹¹ In the novel, he is not only a minor character, but also a crass, backwoods racist not much liked by his fellow troops. In the film Witt is played by Caviezal, a recognizable yet not major star actor whose gentle features later got him the title role in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). The film's main conflict is not Japanese and American antagonism, but the ideological struggle between Witt and Welsh, which virtually bookends the film. Witt is the Emersonian iconoclast whose belief in "other worlds" sets him in direct opposition to Welsh's Lockean empiricism.

Witt begins the film having gone AWOL, appearing at peace with the native Melanesians he's taken up with. Malick's use of indigenous choral music, underlining images of Witt playing with island children, presents a version of found paradise. Caviezal's meditative calm adds to Witt's tranquility in nature: he is continually linked to elements such as fire (the inner good, or "spark" he sees in others) and water (in which he cleanses himself and others of blood). He also is linked with the act of seeing in that he considers the natural world in pensive ways. "Seeing," that is, taking the time to see and be in tune with nature, is paramount of Emerson's version of discovering revelation and transcendence. In *Nature*, he argues that self-attuned individuals can find spiritual commonality with all things through isolation in nature:

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on bare ground,--my head bathed by the

blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the current of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part of parcel of God.⁹²

Witt embodies this ideal, able to contemplate birds, leaves, island children, and even enemy soldiers with the same spiritual reverence. When arrested for going AWOL and berated by Welsh in the steel belly of a warship, Witt cites his closeness with nature as the basis for his faith in a world beyond war. Welsh, given coarser features through Penn's performance, is all army and has no time for Witt's philosophizing. "In this world," he says, "a man himself, is nothing. And there ain't no world but this one...this rock." Witt responds, "You're wrong there, Top—I seen another world. Sometimes I think it was just my imagination." The crux of conflict in Malick's film rests internally, in Witt's quest to discover in fact if the other world exists or if it's an unattainable fantasy.

This tension between ideal and real worlds, between Witt's "spark" and Welsh's "rock," is evoked by Malick's shot selections, which alternate between grounded images of death (a close-up of a dying bird, for example) and romantic shots tinged with sublimity (such as his numerous low-angle images of sun and sky). In this shot selection and cinematography, Michaels claims that Malick "replicates Emerson's famous metaphor in *Nature* of ecstatic perception as a 'transparent eyeball' ...reflecting 'the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty'." At the same time, he also remains aware of what Emerson [in his essay "Experience"] called the 'evanescence and lubricity of all objects' that renders

such...perception so tragically transient.”⁹³ In other words, Malick’s camerawork echoes the film’s philosophical struggle of retaining spirituality in the midst of corporeal warfare. When a young soldier lies shot and dying, his final glance is upwards, where we glimpse Malick’s trademark image of sunlight streaming in through trees. But that this moment is couched in a combat sequence attests to the temporal nature of such spiritual moments where paradise appears in the world.

Such moments also get at a fundamental characteristic of Malick’s cinema: his willingness to interrupt narrative action in order to focus on moments of philosophical or emotive feeling. For example, when Bell volunteers to scout out the Japanese bunker, Malick collects him in a wide crane shot that also includes the hill ahead of him. Judging from this set-up, we expect to follow Bell uninterrupted as he belly crawls his way through the grass. But Malick departs from the action-sequence and instead cuts to Bell’s flashback memories of him and his wife in romantic embrace. By the time we return to Bell in the grass, the momentum of the action sequence has been severely undercut. Malick has no problem disrupting linear narrative continuity for the sake of poetic asides.

The tension between the reality of combat and the romantic self-consciousness of the soldiers takes shape in Witt’s struggle to locate personal transcendence from the war. Witt wants to achieve calm in the face of death like his mother did when he was a child. In the opening sequences, walking along a shoreline, he shares this desire to his fellow AWOL soldier, Ash (Thomas Jane):

I remember my mother when she was dying. She looked all shrunk up and gray. I asked her if she was afraid. She just shook her head. I was afraid to touch the death I seen in her. Couldn't find anything beautiful or uplifting in it. I hear people talk about immortality, but I ain't seen it. I wondered how it'd be when I died. What it'd be like to know that this breath now was the last one you was ever gonna draw. I just hope I can meet it the same way she did, with the same calm. Cause that's where it's hidden—the immortality I hadn't seen.

Throughout the film Witt tries to help dying soldiers achieve a similar sense of calm, holding their hands and telling them not to be afraid. But only when confronted with his death is Witt able to discover this revelation he desires. In the film's emotional climax, Witt and two soldiers—Fife (Adrian Brody) and Coombs (Matt Doran)—scout the pursuing Japanese force along a river. When Coombs is wounded and it becomes apparent the entire company is in danger, Witt volunteers to distract the enemy troops away. Witt's action is inferred as self-sacrifice—he and Fife exchange a long series of looks conveying the gravity of the situation. Running from the Japanese through the jungle, Witt eventually is surrounded by rifles. The camera moves slowly toward and away from his face as the Japanese yell commands. As music swells, Witt seems to arrive at a calming epiphany, and consciously raises his rifle so that the Japanese will shoot and kill him.

In a *Senses of Cinema* article, author Michael Filippidis writes that “Witt's sacrificial death, with its serene calm in the face of imminent death, matching that of his mother at her passing, is the moment of absolute transcendence in the

film.”⁹⁴ Filippidis’ word choice here (“transcendence”) is key; the way Malick constructs this moment affirms Witt’s spiritual transformation. That Witt very nearly meets our gaze through the screen just before his death contracts the audience to understand his decision to raise his rifle, having made peace with what will happen. The cut to a low-angle shot as Witt’s body falls out of frame takes emphasis away from his corporality and transfers it to his spiritual ascension through the following low-angle shot of sunlight. Malick also prefaces the lethal gunshot audibly with surging water, anticipating the edit to Witt swimming with Melanesian children, establishing his communion with a wider thread of life and his achievement of a final, graceful transcendence. Power says of Witt’s death that “Emerson and Thoreau would be proud; Witt takes a nonconformist action that both asserts his own individuality and affirms his connection to humanity.”⁹⁵ Thus the film’s answer to how one rises above the horrors of war rests not in the physical, but in communion with all living things and right moral action that forms the basis of Emerson’s spiritual philosophy.

Witt helps mark a distinct evolution in Malick’s cinema; he exists not so much for his character but rather as an archetype to communicate Malick’s broader philosophical message. Over the course of Malick’s career, Witt and others become the subject of fascination (and some criticism) because they are seen as philosophical straw-men that carry the metaphysical weight while remaining one-dimensional as people. Donoghue, writing of Malick’s work since

The Thin Red Line, observes that “it is as though plot and character become mere vehicles for Malick’s larger thematic or formal concerns.”⁹⁶

At the same time, in a *Film Comment* review, Gavin Smith argues that in *The Thin Red Line* Malick finally succeeded in presenting a protagonist with the “receptivity and empathy with any chosen object of contemplation” to make possible a filmable transcendence.⁹⁷ The characters of *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* lack the inward self-questioning and outward moral action that Witt carries out. After constructing people whose broken senses of self or inability to “conform their lives to the pure idea within” led to failed paradises, Malick puts forth Witt as the ideal blueprint for an Emersonian life. No other Malick character up to this point was capable of “articulating the metaphysical perspective” of man’s relationship to nature and the ethereal ties that bind all things in obligation to one another. “That Malick has succeeded in rendering a truly subjective male protagonist in this film,” Filippidis goes on, “is testament to his twenty-year incubation and maturation as a filmmaker.”⁹⁸

Witt and the film’s broader philosophical dimensions, including its perplexing voice-over, gripped some and turned off others. Critics sensed a new, evolved Malick in *The Thin Red Line*, but audiences accustomed to comforting patriotic ideology in war narratives looked the other way. Malick’s movie makes no concessions to nationalism—it instead asserts our connection to broader life while valorizing the individual experience. The film thus attends to those ethereal

dimensions of the human condition too often neglected in war films—those perspectives and revelations where the soul announces itself. Malick's next two films, released in relatively rapid-fire succession, offer refined versions of this new direction in his cinema.

Chapter Three

Nature is made to conspire with the spirit to emancipate us.

*--Emerson's Nature*⁹⁹

Nature and Grace: *The New World* and *The Tree of Life*

The Thin Red Line signaled Malick's shift to overt themes of personal transcendence and spiritual wholeness that existed in more subdued forms in his first two films. But what may have appeared as the director's temporary foray into highly philosophical filmmaking became, after his following two films, a first clear gesture toward a new soulful cinema where characters achieve self-recovery from material lives. *The New World* (2005) and *The Tree of Life* (2011) carry forth many of Malick's Emersonian concerns into two very different narrative settings: the interactions between Native Americans and English colonists during the founding of Jamestown in the 17th century, and a radical space-time continuum reaching back from the modern-day to the 1950s to the creation of the universe itself. By most accounts, these are difficult films that try viewer patience with slow narrative structures and weighty metaphysical voice-over about love, spirituality, and death. They also reaffirm their director's intent to remain outside the norms of mainstream Hollywood filmmaking in order to express a highly personal and philosophical view of the world.

The New World

The New World carries forth Malick's attention to the transcendent power of nature and the individual struggle for revelation on an imperfect earth. Malick had written a script for the film back in the 1970s, but the project never gained speed until his critical success with *The Thin Red Line*. Observers have suggested that his fascination with native Melanesian people featured in the latter film reaffirmed his interest in filming the Pocahontas story. And given the many shared narrative and stylistic traits of both projects, it is easy to see *The New World* as a continuation of the prior war film.

In any case, Malick thought there was more to the Pocahontas myth than had been peddled in popular memory or the 1995 animated Disney blockbuster, *Pocahontas*. But the film represented a challenge: the tale of European interactions with native tribes carries the potential for culturally insensitive or historically dubious depictions of native history. Also, Malick's film, which had cast unknown fourteen-year-old actress Q'orianka Kilcher in the starring role, ran the risk of appearing too artsy for mainstream audiences, the same viewers who had been lured into *The Thin Red Line* eight years earlier only to scoff at an eccentric director's highly personal vision of an emotional national event. *The New World* builds on the metaphysical aesthetic and mood developed in the 1998 picture: Malick weaves together multiple expressive voice-overs, grand images of nature, rich classical source music, and natural light schemes to shape his

philosophical approach to the Pocahontas narrative. And like *The Thin Red Line*, *The New World* struggled to find an audience, grossing just \$30 million worldwide, the lowest total of Malick's career.¹⁰⁰

Even though the popularly known (but historically apocryphal) romance between Pocahontas and Englishman John Smith ferries viewers through the film (*The New World* was marketed "first and foremost as a love story," as pitched by producer Sarah Green),¹⁰¹ plot and character development are generally subordinated to broader poetic qualities of form and feeling—the stuff of Malick's contemplative cinema. Reviewers have pointed out the sparse amount of dialogue relative to meditative voice-over or scenes overwhelmed by non-diegetic music, while Malick's camera, free to wander the landscape, captures beautifully composed images of sky streaming through treetops or water glowing under the sun. The result is what scholar David Sterritt attributes to Malick's pronounced Emersonian sensibility, calling *The New World* "another grand choral work made from the perspective of Emerson's Over-Soul... A game attempt at a transcendentalist visual symphony."¹⁰² Specifically, Malick's symphony extends his fascination with nature to include, for the first time in his cinema, a character conceptually meshed with the spirit of the world. Pocahontas, born of nature and attuned to its transformative powers, rises above her material condition to achieve spiritual synthesis with Mother Earth.

The New World follows the narrative outline of the Pocahontas myth familiar to most Americans. After landing on the Virginian shore in 1607, English colonists struggle to establish a fort alongside the nearby Powhatan tribe, to which Pocahontas belongs. Relations between the Europeans and the “natives” or “savages,” as they are dubbed, quickly sour. The mutinous soldier Smith (Colin Farrell), searching for his own second chance at life, is captured by the Powhatons, his life spared only when Pocahontas begs her father, the Chief, to have mercy. As cross-cultural love blossoms between the princess and the English rogue, the Chief grows wary and sends Smith back to the Jamestown colony. In contrast to the peace and love he found in the forest, Smith returns to a society wracked by disease, hunger, and power-hungry in-fighting. The winter season threatens to eradicate the English, but they are saved by Pocahontas, who goes against her father’s wishes to provide food and clothing for the desperate men (her underlying motivation being to reunite with Smith).

When it becomes apparent the English mean to stay, the Chief’s warriors clash with the colonists in the film’s only action sequence (despite what the DVD’s sensational cover art would have us believe).¹⁰³ Pocahontas, chastised for her generosity toward the invaders, is disowned by her father and banished from her people, eventually forced to seek refuge with the English. Smith, a victim of mutiny against his command and now disillusioned with the world, decides to accept a request to explore the northern shores, leaving the princess to an

uncertain future. Tiptoeing her way into assimilation, Rebecca (Pocahontas' assigned English name) eventually weds a wealthy tobacco farmer, John Rolfe (Christian Bale). The final third of the film chronicles Pocahontas/Rebecca's transition from forlorn and abandoned native to a corset-wearing wife and mother willing to embrace love with Rolfe and at peace with the world. Having settled in England with her husband and son, Pocahontas/Rebecca dies at the end of the film, a death marking her spiritual return to the natural forest.

As this outline implies, *The New World* features nature even more prominently than *The Thin Red Line*, so much so that critics accused Malick of being more interested in the beauty of the world than the drama playing out in it. Nature all but directly speaks in the film: chirping birds, river water, and wispy wind frequent the soundtrack, while Malick's trademark gorgeous cinematography, shot by Emmanuel Lubezki, captures the crispness of every leaf through the rare use of 65mm film, a more expensive choice than standard 35mm.¹⁰⁴ Hence Michaels notes that *The New World* "subordinates dramatic development and the construction of character to sublime images of the natural world and dialogue that centers on spiritual truths."¹⁰⁵ Instead of acting as the impetus for multiple soldiers' contemplative soul-searching in *The Thin Red Line*, nature in *The New World* becomes the spiritual equivalent to a specific character, Pocahontas, whose presence in the film is aligned with the natural world. Her opening voice-over, for example, heard over a beautiful composition of sky and

trees reflected on lake water, establishes nature as an energy which the princess appeals to throughout the film: “Come spirit—help us learn the story of our land. You are our mother. We rise from out of the soul of you.” The accompanying low-angle shot of Pocahontas raising her arms to the sky links her with Mother Earth, and calls the film to life.

Two Worlds

Like Malick’s previous films, *The New World* centers philosophically around the fundamental tension between the material and the spiritual, between the utilization of land as physical property and the exploration of nature’s spiritual mysteries. Malick oscillates between idealized visions of nature set to majestic non-diegetic music and more raw images of materialist civilization, immersing the viewer in the sights and sounds of the Powhatan tribe as well as the bleak reality inside the English fort. Returning to Sterritt’s review, the film “affords [Malick] a perfect opportunity to examine contrasts between the notion of a timeless harmony with nature, represented by Native American society, and the post-Enlightenment ideal of taming and harnessing nature to accomplish humanly determined goals, as the English colonists do.”¹⁰⁶

Two different paradises thus exist in *The New World*: the first is seen through European eyes, the “Eden” that represents an escape “from the old world and its bondage,” according to Captain Newport (Christopher Plummer). He tries to rally his tired men: “Let us make a new beginning and create a fresh example

for humanity.... Let us prepare a land where a man may rise to his true stature, a land of the future, a new kingdom of the spirit.” Newport’s comment about “a kingdom of the spirit,” though in keeping with contemporaneous attitudes about the “new” continent’s potential, must be read somewhat ironically given his crew’s lust for material prosperity in Virginia, exemplified in the scene where colonists, scarce on food, busy themselves searching for gold in the nearby shorelines. Smith notes disapprovingly: “While they starve they dig for gold. You’re chasing a dream,” but a bad dream in this case, a dream not of the spirit but the coffers.

The other paradise is the harmonious state of grace with the world embodied by Pocahontas and her tribe. The way the natives move through space, sometimes weaving elegantly through grass, other times adopting animal postures, gets at Malick’s strict belief that the natives should be presented as spiritually in touch with Mother Earth. In a behind-the-scenes vignette on the making of the film, dance choreographer Rulan Tangen tells the actors portraying the natives: “What [Malick] wants to see more than anything else, what separates you from the English, is that you people are in complete harmony with the earth and the universe and everything that exists.”¹⁰⁷ Malick’s hand-held camera, eschewing visual stability, bobs and weaves with the natives, expressing their kinetic, organic energy with their environment, while the English are often shot in relatively standard, stable set-ups. This attention to the purity of the natives

extends to production design as well. According to producer Sarah Green in an interview describing the making of the film, set and costume designers went to great lengths to replicate with as much accuracy as possible the dress and decorum of Powhatan population. In tandem with the expertise of endangered language specialist Blair Rudes, who helped recreate Algonquin dialogue scenes, *The New World* takes pains to channel the integrities of native life.¹⁰⁸

At the intersection of the two paradises in the film are Pocahontas and Smith. In the latter, Malick constructs a synthesis of the conflicting philosophies contained in Witt's Idealism and Welsh's Empiricism from *The Thin Red Line*. For example, when Smith is captured and partially assimilated into Powhatan culture (a sequence recalling Witt's interactions with native Melanesians), he plays with small children, laughs with native warriors, and lounges tranquilly in nature. He discovers among the natives what Michaels calls "a utopian existence...that represents for Malick not the historical reality but the spiritual ideal."¹⁰⁹ Smith admires the natives in voice-over: "They are gentle, loving, faithful...The words denoting lying, envy, greed, have never been heard. They have no jealousy, no sense of possession... It was real, what I thought a dream." This is the conflict in Smith (and the broader film): whether life defined by love and grace can exist (which it does until the colonists show up) or if it is an unattainable paradise.

When conflict later breaks out between the colonists and the natives, Smith defaults back to his pessimistic view of the world. Deciding he must leave Virginia, he ponders what to say to Pocahontas: “Tell her. Tell her what? It was a dream. Now I am awake.” Here the love he knew is a hollow memory, as if it never happened. But later, Smith looks back on his time with the natives and reevaluates its reality. “Did you find your Indies, John?” the princess asks. “You shall.” Smith, obviously referring to his error in leaving, replies: “I may have sailed past them. I thought it was a dream, what we knew in the forest. It’s the only truth.” Just as Witt functioned for Malick as the affirming messenger of Idealism in nature, Smith does the same by confessing his regret for not embracing the goodness he found with the natives. He goes from embracing the Ideal, to chastising it as “only a dream,” and then, too late, affirming it as the “only truth.” Thus *The New World* mirrors *The Thin Red Line* in that the main conflict between the spiritual and the material is rendered through the contrast between an indigenous population in tune with nature’s life-giving properties, and “civilized” invaders from another place whose material ambitions run counter to the spiritual Ideal. “Both of Malick's big-scale sagas,” summarizes Sterritt, “tell of violent, sometimes deadly struggles involving denizens of an Eden-like land and “civilized” interlopers with utterly different agendas.”¹¹⁰

The New World does not solely exaggerate these gulfs between two worlds and leave them be—instead it portrays the glory when such differences are

bridged, fused into a common love or soul. *The Thin Red Line* articulated through Sergeant Welsh the fundamental isolated nature of human life—“You got to make yourself a rock.” By contrast, *The New World* showcases the glory of connective harmony among all things. A major way Malick expresses these reconciliations involves his recurrent use of Richard Wagner’s operatic prelude to *Das Rheingold*. The piece, led by horns, gradually builds in pitch and instrumentation to express ascension, reconciliation, or transcendence. A deep, proud bass note sustains throughout while strings and brass, more playful and loose, slowly raise the piece to heavenly heights: the music finishes triumphantly whole from its humble beginnings. The prelude features prominently in three important sequences, all of which express a union of some kind (between continents, between people, between spirits).

The first is the arrival of the colonists on the shore, a sequence which trades perspectives between the English and the Powhatons, each culture marveling in the encounter with faraway civilizations. Though history reveals the utter devastation of Native Americans at the hands of European colonists, their initial contact in Malick’s film is constructed—with the help of Wagner’s romantic music—as an inspiring union between two continents, full of potential.

The second use of Wagner narrows down to a personal level when the princess and Smith chase and dance with each other in the forest, the chaste consummation of their love. It is no mistake that the first words they teach each

other are “sun,” “wind,” and “water,” suggesting not only the primacy of nature but its ability to connect souls attuned to it. The lovers’ voices, like their limbs and the limbs of the trees above them, interlock and combine:

Pocahontas: Free.

Smith: My true light.

Pocahontas: Can love lie?

Smith: My America.

Pocahontas: Where are you my love?

Smith: That fort is not the world. The river leads back there. It leads onward too. Deeper. Into the wild. Start over. Exchange this false life for a true one. Give up the name of Smith.

Here the princess questions the magnetic pull she feels toward Smith, while he contemplates beginning a new life with her in the forest, forgetting his European life to embrace an American paradise. Moments later, underscored by Wagner, Malick returns to an extended voice-over from Pocahontas in which she ponders the source of nature’s energy, appeals to it for guidance, and then addresses Smith in her mind—the result is a uniting of the lovers’ souls into one:

Mother, where do you live? In the sky? The clouds? The sea? Show me your face. Give me a sign. We rise. We rise. Afraid of myself. A god, he seems to me. What else is life but being near you? Do they suspect? Oh, to be given to you, you to me. I will be faithful to you. True. Two no more. One. One I am. I am.

The third and final use of Wagner’s prelude occurs at the film’s final sequence, which depicts Pocahontas’ death and her transcendence into nature. But in order to appreciate this ending, we must understand Pocahontas’ journey to this point and her relationship with Mother Earth.

Emerson's Princess

There is a constant confluence of nature and spirit in the film. The trees, water, and birds favored by Malick's camera and set to majestic music contain the paradise lived by the naturals and sought by the Europeans. For Emerson—as well as Malick—the mere presence of nature confers the spiritual: “Through all its kingdoms, to the suburbs and outskirts of things, [nature] is faithful to the cause whence it had its origins. It always speaks of Spirit. It suggests the absolute. It is a perpetual effect. It is a great shadow pointing always to the sun behind us.”¹¹¹ Pocahontas' relationship with nature, particularly, represents the kind of conscious spiritual communion with the world that Emerson celebrates in *Nature*. To Emerson, nature and humans are not fundamentally remote from one another, but two different streams traceable to the same spiritual source, the same eternal ONE: “The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them.”¹¹²

The many direct addresses the princess makes to Mother Earth in voice-over establish her closeness with nature. When wrestling with conflicting feelings for Rolfe, Pocahontas appeals to her Mother for guidance, using analogies involving nature to phrase her prayer:

Mother, why can I not feel as I should? Must? Once false, I must not be again. Take out the thorn. He is like a tree. He shelters me. I lie in his shade. Can I ignore my heart? What is from you and what is not? Great

sun, I offer you thanks. You give life to the trees and the hills, to the streams of water, to all. Mother, your love is before my eyes. Show me your way. Teach me your path. Give me a humble heart.

As portrayed by Kilcher (the result of a world-wide talent search that involved thousands of actresses), whose gentle features and calming presence recalls Caviezal's performance in *The Thin Red Line*, Pocahontas embodies grace in the world. Also like Caviezal's character, Pocahontas' hardships (her banishment, the loss of Smith, and her forced assimilation) and eventual transcendence from said hardships reaffirms Malick's message of cosmic harmony and goodness despite fracturing human dramas.

The final sequences of *The New World*, as Michaels describes, are "largely devoted to depicting the flowering of [that goodness], inspired by prayer not from the catechism of [Pocahontas'] adopted religion but her American Indian soul."¹¹³ In Malick's hands, Pocahontas is not pitied but imbued with the same resilience found in nature. For instance, stuck into a corset by her well-meaning English attendant, Pocahontas maintains her communion with the spirit world: "Mother, you are my strength, or I have none." In a *Film Comment* review, Kent Jones says of this moment that "[Pocahontas'] steadfastly serene face boomerangs back the film's transcendental idea: this supremely graceful girl, a disgrace to her own people, can't help but bestow her own charms on the stiff-backed colonial world."¹¹⁴ Mary, the English maid, realizes the strong personality contained in this girl, and in a brilliant piece of dialogue that encapsulates Pocahontas' inner spark,

speaks the truth: “A nature like yours can turn trouble into good. All this sorrow will give you strength, and point you on a higher way. Think of a tree, how it grows around its roots. If a branch breaks off, it don’t stop—but keeps reaching towards the light.” Key here is the analogy drawn between Pocahontas and a tree (Malick’s favorite object) and the reference to light, the “perpetual presence of the sublime” that pervades the world (and the film). Pocahontas takes this advice to heart and sets her mind to rediscovering the glory she once knew.

The peace she finds in Europe is a purely spiritual calm not dissimilar to the grace sought by Witt in *The Thin Red Line*. Whereas Witt wanted to “achieve calm in the face of death” like his mother, Rebecca desires to “find joy in all [she] sees.” According to Michaels, this vow is a pledge that “Malick’s camera...persistently [confirms] by seeking not to master nature by examining and recording it but rather, in Emerson’s phrase, by wearing the colors of the spirit as the Native Americans once did.”¹¹⁵ In the section of *Nature* titled “Spirit,” Emerson implores readers to “conform your life to the pure idea in your mind,” that is, to realize the Ideal. “Build therefore your own world... A correspondent revolution of things will attend the influx of the spirit. So fast will disagreeable, swine, spiders, snakes, pests, mad-houses, prisons, enemies, vanish; they are temporary and shall be no more seen.”¹¹⁶ This is what Pocahontas does: she conforms her life to the inner edict she sets for herself, and the result is the

conclusion of the film where her transcendence is constructed as a spiritual fusion with her mother: Nature.

Having made peace with Smith, Pocahontas plays hide and seek with her young son in the meticulously landscaped English garden on Rolfe's estate. Though the garden is far away from the unkempt foliage of her forest origins, a serenity comes over her face not present since her days with her tribe. As Wagner's music comes to life, she smiles, closes her eyes, and speaks her final line of the film: "Mother, now I know where you live." The line references her previous voice-over questioning the source of the life-giving energy in the world. Malick's answer to such questions is the contentment associated with grace, harmony, and compassion—the inner life of the individual, the self-reliant mind able to look past one's material condition. Appropriately, the camera then loses sight of Pocahontas (we no longer see her material self), launching Rolfe's voice-over in which he writes a letter to his son explaining the details of his mother's death: "She gently reminded me that all must die. It is enough, she said, that you, our child, should live."

Instead of a sentimental death bed scene, Malick speeds through her corporeal demise, withholding her face from the frame as she expires. We see a traditionally dressed Native American warrior sitting in the princess' room, staring at the empty bed; a quick cut-away shows the warrior running out of the house and into the lawn. What can this brief insert mean? Is it literally a native

guest running to report back to the Americas? Or does the warrior instead represent Pocahontas' native soul, released from her body to return to the natural world? It's a mystery Malick leaves to us, one of many mysteries in his cinema where we cannot easily distinguish between the physical and the metaphysical.

But from the suggestion of death comes a flourish of life. Set to Wagner's prelude, the final vibrant montage features idealized images of Pocahontas twirling and performing cartwheels under trees and alongside a pond. This is her spirit at play, released from her body. The quick cut to a small graveyard, rendered in a single static shot, not only stands out in relation to the surrounding dynamic camerawork, but also reminds us of the difference between the material and the spiritual: Pocahontas' body may be laid to rest, but something of her essence remains ungraspable, uncontained. In parallel to this, Malick then shows Rolfe and his son boarding a ship back heading back to "the new world," given full celestial treatment with orange sunlight and low angle shots of the ship cutting through the ocean, as if spurred by a primordial calling. As the ship disappears from the frame into the ocean, Malick's camera transports us back to America in a rush of quick cuts of river water and treetops, settling, finally, on his trademark image: a low-angle shot of sky peeking down through trees.

The culmination of Pocahontas' death in England, her family's trip back to America, and the montage of natural imagery, seems to Michaels "a realistic concession to the processes of life, what Emerson and Thoreau had celebrated as

the organic quality of nature.”¹¹⁷ Whereas Smith previously had been physically saved from peril several times, his soul has at this point been ravaged by his removal from paradise in the forest and the love he knew there. The princess, however, begins life anew: by giving birth to a son and aligning herself with the “pure idea within,” she achieves a final state of grace in death and joins the surging elements of Mother Earth, where she, too, now lives.

The Tree of Life

“*The New World*,” Sterritt writes, “is a cinematic creation story, using the idea that all stages of existence – birth, growth, maturity, death – are entwined with one another in cultural histories and individual lives.”¹¹⁸ If this is the case, *The Tree of Life*, Malick’s next work, explores this interconnectedness of life cycles to the extreme, rendering a space-time continuum that depicts no less than the creation of the universe and a grand spiritual eternity of all life.

Released in 2011, the film won the Palme D’Or at the Cannes Film Festival to a mixed chorus of boos and cheers. Garnering Academy Award nominations for Best Picture and Best Director, it was heavily marketed and attracted new audiences that had never before heard of Malick. But lest we think *The Tree of Life* represents a softening of its director’s radical philosophical approach in the name of audience-friendliness, it is quite the opposite. In his book *Terrence Malick and the Thought of Film*, Rybin writes that Malick’s fifth film

“defies encapsulation”¹¹⁹ owing to the sheer breadth of its subject matter, the fragmented structure of its narrative, and its kaleidoscopic aesthetic full of perplexing images, swooping camerawork, and majestic music. Any overarching “meaning” of the film eludes many while its visual and aural ingredients overwhelm the senses. Single-word appraisals range from “Breathtaking” to “Eye-popping” to “Love-it-or-hate-it.”¹²⁰ The hugely mixed and hyperbolic responses to the film correlate well with its conflicting scopes, which includes both the birth of the universe and dramas around a dinner table. *The Tree of Life* is also Malick’s most personal work, Sterritt reports, based to some degree on his upbringing in Texas in the 1950s.¹²¹

Critics predictably focus on the film’s explicit philosophical content as buoyed by Malick’s trademark style (non-linear narrative structure, expressive use of multiple voice-overs, copious amounts of classical and choral source music, devout attention to beautiful compositions, etc.). Like *The New World*, *The Tree of Life* was written several years prior to being filmed. After *Days of Heaven* in 1978, Malick readied a script called *Q*, an ambitious depiction of the origins of life. Hollywood kept its distance, and Malick abandoned the story until after completing *The New World*, when studios were more willing to embrace Malick’s auteur signature and cult status among cineastes. Even so, *The Tree of Life* is his most ambitious project. Not only does it use extensive special effects to depict life in the cosmos (and the lives of dinosaurs), but the sheer reach of the film—from

nebulous gases in space to the evolution of life on Earth to scenes of childhood life in 1950s America—makes it stand out from his other films (indeed all other films, period).

Limbs of a Tree

To make sense of this work, it helps to parse out a discernible shape to its narrative. The film is structured around four settings: first is a contemporary one (another first in Malick's cinema) in which a melancholy architect, Jack (Sean Penn), sifts through memories of his suburban childhood. Via whispered voice-over and inserts of other scenes, we learn that Jack's younger brother, R.L. (Laramie Eppler), died at the age of 19. Jack desires to understand his brother's lasting legacy on him, the "goodness" that he knew when they were children but which has since been muscled out in his modern world (his adult life is cold and distorted by Malick's wide-angle lenses). "You spoke to me from the sky...Before I knew I loved you. Believed in you. When did you first touch my heart?" This question (like all other questions adult Jack asks) is directed not at God, but his dead brother; they compel the movie back in time to his childhood where we piece together an understanding of his brother's impact on him.

The second setting involves the scenes (roughly the 1970s) where Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien (Brad Pitt and Jessica Chastain) receive word of said brother's death (whether by suicide, Vietnam, or otherwise, we never find out—Malick's brother killed himself around the same age).¹²² These scenes—fragments of

scenes, really— are brief: the parents grieve, Mrs. O'Brien walks through a forest and interrogates God for answers: "Was I false to you?" As she continues to prod God for explanations, Malick transports viewers to the indifferent, cataclysmic creation of the universe from the emptiness of space.

This is the film's third—and most controversial—setting. The creation sequences, progressing from nebulous gases to massive slow-motion explosions to the vague coalescing of planets and stars, is set to grand choral music and Mrs. O'Brien's lingering voice-over questions directed at a higher power. We also see the evolution of life on Earth, complete with single-cell organisms, water-bound creatures, and even dinosaurs. The sequence resembles a NASA or nature documentary more than a feature film, a macrocosmos field-trip for the audience that culminates in an asteroid striking the Earth.

The fourth setting of the film is the flashback portion (the bulk of the narrative) in which we view young Jack's (Hunter McCracken) childhood in an undisclosed location sometime in the 1950s or 1960s (though Sterritt, author of the *Film Quarterly* article "Days of Heaven and Waco: Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*," confidently places things in Texas in the 1950s, which keeps with Malick's life).¹²³ Quick montages of Jack's birth and toddlerhood settle into relatively stable, linear sequences of his adolescent relationships with his parents and brothers. Amidst his trips to church, his play in the streets, and his strained relationship with his disciplinarian father, Jack discovers a number of life truths:

violence, death, evil, and redemption. His voice-over dominates the soundtrack, expressing hate for his father and appealing, like his mother, to some higher power for answers to life's questions.

At the end of the flashback the family begins the move to a different state for the father's job. He's a failed inventor and entrepreneur who loses his patents on technology—a failure which sparks his recognition in the follies of a material life. "I looked all around me, at the trees, the birds, but I didn't see the glory," he laments in his only voice-over (Malick withholds the device until the father "sees the light"). The family's move brings the film back to the contemporary moment before moving on to the final segment: images of Heaven-like white shores (what Malick in his script describes as "Eternity")¹²⁴ and churning blue waters where adult Jack walks among characters from the 1950s portion, an intertwining of the souls from different epochs of time. While Malick saturates us in lens flares and booming orchestration, Mrs. O'Brien accepts her son's death and achieves calm with the film's final line: "I give him to you. I give you my son."

Critics are attuned to Emersonian sensibilities in the film. Writing in *The New Yorker*, Anthony Lane, citing the film's many voice-overs and its suggestion of a grand spiritual tapestry, argues that watching *The Tree of Life* is akin to reading Emerson's "The Over-Soul" more than any distinct cinematic experience.¹²⁵ Certainly the ruminative mood of the film, where characters either speak to God or a dead brother, recall the poetic nature of Emerson's writing. Just

as Emerson claims the “soul circumscribes all things...[and] abolishes time and space,”¹²⁶ so too does Malick’s camera and narrative construction fly free: his frequent cut-aways between epochs of time, his musical or voice-over sound bridges, and his staging of puzzling events that bridge the physical/metaphysical divide (doorways open onto desert wastelands, children escape from bedroom trunks only to swim upward in blue water) all combine to form a film unmoored from logical staging of action.

Writing for *Hydra Magazine*, meanwhile, Jose-Luis Moctezuma finds Malick’s liberal use of visual and aural elements to be counteractive to the theme of calming transcendence. He argues that “if Terrence Malick, the sage of Waco, Texas, is the new Emerson, then his *Tree of Life* introduces an updated, 21st century Transcendentalism that uses cinematic hyperbole and a barrage of ultra-scenic visuals that irk and distract rather than enlighten.”¹²⁷ We often do not understand what we are looking at in the film, even if we understand Malick’s core belief in the primacy of the spiritual experience over the statically material. Such complaints about Malick’s sensory overload are common, but the more fundamental question for me here rests in the work’s continuing expression of a distinct Emersonian philosophy. Specifically, the film ruminates on ideas present in Emerson’s two essays, “Compensation” and “Experience.”

Compensation

The film hinges on Jack's internal struggle to re-cultivate his soul, an element established in the opening segment. We see an orange, flame-like swirl in the black space of the frame—a spirit, a soul, a suggestion of the eternal? A male voice softly breaks the silence: “Brother. Mother. It was they who led me to your door.” At this point we do not know the origins for or context of this voice (the script doesn't include this line). As in *The Thin Red Line*, we begin with an unknown voice that, even later, we have trouble distinguishing as a specific character—the articulation of spiritual form takes precedence over concrete character.

Only gradually as the film unfolds can we infer the voice belongs to an adult R.L. whose spirit revisits Jack as an ideal of goodness that Jack wants to rediscover. Jack's workplace (present-day Houston) is filmed as a steely corporate dead zone where faces rush by the camera and voices remain indistinct and alien. The staccato editing and “fisheye lens” (which elongates and distorts images) is intended, as Malick describes in his script, to reflect a fragmented modern world where “one must stoop to walk. A world that would exclude the transcendent.”¹²⁸ Only when Malick gradually meshes the sounds of chirping birds and rushing water with the buzz of modern life does a transition begin, ushered along by the voice of young R.L. breaking through the clutter to order Jack: “Find me.” (Later, near the end of the film, young R.L. will call out “Follow me” as a procession

lights candles and enters “Eternity” on the beach.) Jack’s journey thus begins: looking out his office window at the only tree in courtyard, he asks “How did I lose you?” He is referring to the memory of his brother, yes, but more broadly to the spiritual wholeness his brother represents for him: “How do I get back there?” Adult Jack’s desire to remember the goodness in his brother represents his attempt to get back to some higher form of moral and spiritual wholeness. This discovery, however, is dependent on the choices of everyday life, which *The Tree of Life* highlights as the crux of its drama.

This conflict is given form early on in the film. At the start of the childhood flashback, Mrs. O’Brien spells out the fundamental tension in the film and in life—the pull between “nature” and “grace”:

There are two ways through life: the way of nature and the way of grace. You have to choose which one to follow. Grace doesn’t try to please itself...It accepts insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself...It likes to have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy, when all the world is shining around it, and love is shining through all things.

These dual journeys through the world correlate to what Emerson explained in “Compensation” as a fundamental duality to the universe. He argued that “an invisible dualism bisects nature, so that each thing is a half...; spirit, matter; man, woman; odd, even; subjective, objective;...”¹²⁹ Polarity, that is, two opposite yet complimentary extremes, imbues existence. In this case, the dualism is figured as “nature” and “grace,” the eternal tension that dictates how one lives life.

Jack's parents are the obvious referents for these extremes. Jack's father embodies nature: his gruff, disciplinarian ways ("You will call me 'Sir,' not 'Dad'") and emphasis on success (he's painted as a capitalist who has nailed down several technology patents) makes him an aggressive, uncaring figure in the eyes of his children. Mrs. O'Brien embodies grace: her patience with her children and angel-like harmony with the world sets her up as the Ideal soul, and Malick often films her with near-blinding back-light. In one of the many idealized sequences of play on the family's suburban lawn, she whispers to us the mantra of a graceful way through life: "Help each other. Love everyone. Every leaf. Every ray of light. Forgive."

Now compare this with her husband's outlook, which, it is worth noting, does not occur in gentle voice-over but rather as a stern directive to his troops: "Your mother's naïve. It takes fierce will to get ahead in this world.... If you want to succeed you can't be too good." This is what Rybin calls "the permanent conflict of the human spirit" that Malick is interested in exploring; one could substitute Witt and Welsh from *The Thin Red Line* for the parents. As a child, Jack's internal battle results from his disillusionment with a world he sees as pointlessly cruel and hypocritical. "Just as Mrs. O'Brien's own quiet confidence in the power of grace is called into question after the death of her child," Rybin goes on, "so too will her oldest living son wage an internal battle between grace and nature."¹³⁰

When a local boy drowns in a swimming pool (an event Malick gives cosmic significance with dark organ chords) Jack, having not encountered such raw mortality, ponders to a supposedly benevolent God: “Was he bad? Where were you?” Further proof, to Jack, of God’s indifference is a neighborhood boy badly burned in a house fire: “You’ll let anything happen,” he says. These events compel Jack to give up his struggle to reach for the light, if God seems coldly absent. “If you’re not good, why should I be?” His lack of faith in the heavenly father mirrors his disaffection for his biological one, whose actions turn his son against him. Jack laments in voice-over: “He says keep your elbows off the table. He does.” Later he will openly wish for his father’s death: “Please God, kill him.”

In less extreme ways Jack experiments with a life devoid of grace: he breaks windows, beats up his brothers, and steals a neighbor lady’s negligee. These misbehaviors can be seen as simple childhood shenanigans, but Malick gives them unusual gravitas through Jack’s internal voice-over, which constantly checks his actions against a moral ideal: “What have I started?” he worries after stealing the negligee, “What have I done?”

The consequences of immoral actions, however small, are not trivial to Malick because, as Emerson argues, it is in everyday choices where a person cultivates and nourishes the soul. The inherent goodness or evil of a thing contributes to the integrity of the spiritual life. In “Compensation,” Emerson writes that “every act rewards itself” in two ways: in “real nature” (which is “seen

by the soul”) and in “apparent nature” (or a “discrete or separate reward”).¹³¹

Emerson thought that most people configured reward and punishment as the latter, as earthly or heavenly compensation rather than through the “nature of the act itself.” He believed that doing good deeds for material gain or for a reward after death was self-destructive and counter to the natural order of life. This is why Jack’s misdeeds are given deeper significance through strong accompanying orchestration: his individual spiritual struggle with morality is aligned with a grander struggle between evil and harmony contained in the universe.

One example of this universality has garnered much criticism. During the creation sequence, Malick presents an injured herbivore dinosaur on the shore of a river. A meat-eating counterpart appears, and we expect a bloodbath in the vein of *Jurassic Park*. Instead, the carnivore places his foot on the head of the injured creature, seems to have a contemplative moment of conscience, and then moves on, letting the plant-eater live. Far-fetched or not, the apparent benevolence of the dinosaur suggests how Malick feels about the experiences of life across all time and species—that they are intimately linked and equally important to achieving a graceful Ideal. Similarly, Robinson explains, Emerson believed that “no act can be separated from the integrated chain of relations that constitutes the unified whole of reality.”¹³² That is, the particulars of life reflect and contain grander truths across expanses of life. As Emerson writes in “Compensation,” “...the universe is represented in every one of its particles. Every thing in nature contains

all the powers of nature. Every thing is made of one hidden stuff.... Every occupation, trade, art, transaction, is a compend [sic] of the world and a correlative of every other. Each one is an entire emblem of human life.... The world globes itself in a drop of dew.”¹³³ Put another way, Malick collapses the creation of the universe into the experiences of a single life, suggesting a common origin shared between humans and the cosmos. A dinosaur’s behavior and Jack’s actions are linked. “Thus is the universe alive,” Emerson goes on. “All things are moral.”¹³⁴

Religion scholar Brent Plate, in an article exploring Malick’s vision of the universe, puts it well when he says *The Tree of Life* is “simply the latest in a millennia-old project, shared by cultures across the world, of visually reconciling the microcosmos with the macrocosmos, finding our local lives situated within the grand schemes of all things.”¹³⁵ So the way Malick’s camera follows the O’Brien children as they play, imbuing their romps with a grandeur usually reserved for plot climaxes, is not sloppy, hand-held experimentation or artificial inflation of the drama, but Malick’s way of meshing the cosmic and the personal in the same eternal ONE the way Emerson conceived of existence.

We see the culmination of Jack’s struggle between nature and grace when he shoots R.L. with a BB gun, an event that causes a change in Jack: “How do I get back? Where they are?” he wonders, referring to the “they” who appear later as a collection of souls on a beach. The answer rests in R.L.’s quick willingness to

forgive Jack, his gentleness that through his later death becomes the ideal for adult Jack's spiritual journey. R.L. can be viewed as the martyr for transcendent goodness just as Witt and Pocahontas function in their respective films: all are characters whose grace and love leads to spiritual transcendence and whose examples impact others. When Jack makes nice with an ostracized neighbor boy, placing a hand on his shoulder in an act of kindness, we understand that R.L.'s example has influenced Jack. The latter brother's voice-over attributes his new pull to goodness to R.L.'s eternal spirit: "What was it you showed me? I didn't know how to name you then. But I see it was you. Always you were calling me." Rather than a specific God figure, Jack appeals to an Emersonian sense of inner integrity and light—the spiritual wholeness that he hopes will "guide us to the end of time," as his adult self says at the film's end.

This ending deserves a more comprehensive note. The film skillfully articulates what Emerson saw as the difference between conceptualizing God as a supernatural authority figure and as an internal spiritual energy available within each person. While in the 1970s sequence Mrs. O'Brien in her grief appeals specifically to "The Lord," at the end of the film, when Malick's editing and cinematography construct "Eternity," no such direct address to God is present. Her statement, "I give him to you. I give you my son" can easily be read as a reference to the Over-Soul, to an ethereally connected band of spirits resting not in Heaven but in the residue of all life (here, walking along a beach). Malick is in

fact careful not to include the word “Heaven” in his description of the ending sequence; instead he establishes a motif of images suggestive of passage, of transport between realms (he features quick shots of gates, piers, ladders, and, in the final image of the film, a massive bridge). Like the ships carrying explorers back and forth in *The New World*, the passages here are not necessarily to a Heaven-like afterlife—they instead can be read as a return to the cradle of the eternal origin of all life that remains mysterious and metaphysical.

Experience

The Tree of Life concerns how people retain Idealism when confronted by tragedy. This was a topic of discussion for Emerson, too, in his essay “Experience,” written only two years after the death of his son, Waldo, in 1842. The essay is Emerson’s mediation on the inevitability of grief in the world and the jarring shifts in perception that it evokes. For him, suffering revealed layers of the spiritual life: “Grief too will make us idealists” he writes in the opening paragraph. What he means is that even the loss of a loved one produces higher calls to right action. Geldard helps parse this out as follows: “Spiritually, our losses nurture our capacity for compassion and understanding. We grow in spirit as we are diminished in body, in the connections that appear to define our lives, but in fact only define our boundaries of activity. The loss of a parent, spouse, or child brings us closer to the laws of nature and the primacy of spirit” (90). When

deprived of our material interactions (even family), the spirit shines through at its brightest.

Mrs. O'Brien stands as a model for this experience. Though initially appealing to God for answers to R.L.'s death, by the end of the film she accepts his death and achieves transcendence. We see her walking on white sands, arms reaching upward, crowded by other women shrouded in white who gently caress her hair. Like Pocahontas finding joy in her new life in Europe, Mrs. O'Brien's transcendence results from her embrace of life, not her anger at death or violence. This keeps with a significant piece of voice-over earlier in the film when, driving away from the family's home, Mrs. O'Brien puts into words the Ideal: "The only way to be happy is to love. Unless you love, your life will flash by." This returns us to Emerson's contention that, even amidst the malaise of tragedy or everyday ennui, people can find transcendence by vowing to live an active, meaningful life. He writes, "We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them... To finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of hours, is wisdom."¹³⁶ The resolve to right action—to love—cultivates the soul and the self.

At the end of his essay, Emerson admits that our experiences are fragile and that they throw our Idealism into suspension: he stresses "patience" and "embraces pragmatic action as the way forward, with determined 'doing' our substitute for profound knowledge,"¹³⁷ (165), as Robinson writes. The "doing" is

living a life full of love. Like Mrs. O'Brien's plea for love, Emerson held out that higher goods realized in active behavior could pave the way for meaningful life. Despite the pull of material sufferings and the consensus thought, the Ideal could be realized for the good of all: "Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat; up again, old heart!—it seems to say,—there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power" (188).

Like Emerson does in "Experience," *The Tree of Life* recognizes that the struggle between nature and grace, between love and hate, is an inherent part of existence, one that we navigate as best we can. Part of Jack's spiritual revelation is discovering that conflicting emotions and energies exist in the world: "Mother. Father," he admits late in the film, having reconciled with his dad. "Always you wrestle inside of me. Always you will." This I submit is the key to *The Tree of Life*: the eternal struggle defined by "reaching for the light" while surrounded by darkness, the seemingly indifferent emptiness of space. If, as Emerson and Malick suggest, the experience of life contains both strands equally, the implications of our actions are at once cosmic and personal, grand and quiet, but equally valid in their truth and significance.

Conclusion

The production of a work of art throws a light upon the mystery of humanity.

--Emerson's Nature¹³⁸

To the Wonder and Beyond

Only a year after *The Tree of Life*, Malick released his latest film, *To the Wonder*, his first to be set entirely in the present-day. Trickle into art-house theatres and on-demand television during the winter of 2013, the film is an unconventional love story starring Ben Affleck, Olga Kurylenko, Javier Bardem, and Rachel McAdams. It splits its narrative in two: the “A” story involves the on-again/off-again relationship between an American oil engineer (Affleck) and a French woman (Kurylenko)—the characters have no names in the film, but are credited as Neil and Marina. We switch between France, where the couple enjoys the rush of early love on a visit to Mont Saint-Michel, and an Oklahoma town where they move into a newly developed suburb dotted with large houses.

Once in America, however, their relationship begins to fracture—why we never quite know; they simply fall out of love. Marina returns to Paris and Neil rekindles an old romance with a high school flame (McAdams). But this too peters out inexplicably (we see only images of disconnect, of hands letting go of hands, of bodies moving away from bodies). Later Marina returns to the States to make up with Neil (and to secure a Green Card marriage), but their relationship again is fraught with emotional coldness. “I don’t know where he goes,” confides

Marina to a friend, referring to Neil's detachment. At one point Marina strikes up an affair, a secret she soon confesses to Neil, who reacts angrily. At the end of the film, the couple decides to go their separate ways, but they appear at peace with their decision and the love they once knew. "I want to keep your name," she says to him before boarding a plane to Paris.

The "B" storyline involves a local Catholic priest (Bardem) struggling to retain his faith. He speaks of love and compassion in his sermons, but his face and voice-over tell a different story: he sees the world as increasingly cruel and disfigured, strolling through neighborhoods wracked by poverty and wincing at physical deformities around him. "You're everywhere. And yet I can't see you," he muses to God, walking down empty streets. "My heart is cold, hard." The material realities he observes challenge his faith in inner peace or the spiritual life. But the end of the film suggests he too embraces the existence and value of love, as he comforts several downtrodden people and reminds himself: "You fear your love has died—it is perhaps waiting to be transformed into something higher."

The two storylines sparingly overlap (the priest advises both Neil and Marina in brief scenes) but they are linked philosophically through the characters' mutual struggles to hold on to love in what Malick presents as a conflicted world full of tenderness and bleakness. "This is a cruel war," Marina says of this eternal tension. Though full of moments of emotional disconnect, the film culminates in a sequence in which Marina and the priest both appear willing to embrace an

ethereal ideal of love: “To the love that loves us,” says Marina in one her many voice-overs, twirling through a field, “Thank you.” The final images depict Marina walking along the grey, bleak beaches of northern France—but a light from behind shines on her face. She turns to look and sees Mont Saint-Michel, the French citadel where she and Neil fell in love at the start of the film. The light of love is affirmed even if it shines through a dark landscape.

To the Wonder develops (and in some cases exaggerates) many of the qualities I have explored in this thesis. Like his prior films, Malick avoids particulars of his drama and his characters to meditate on philosophical questions about existence. The conflicts in the relationships are conveyed through impression and mood rather than speeches or action. There is little expository, diegetic dialogue; we hear sporadic fragments of dialogue that Malick quickly fades out from the soundtrack, preferring to communicate feeling through images and music. Contemplative voice-overs dominate once again, shaped as fragmentary thoughts about love, regret, or spiritual loss. “What is this love that loves us? From nowhere? All around us?” asks the priest. Marina, speaking in French, speaks from both the past tense and the present tense, confusing the origins and parameters of her voice-over. “Which is the truth?” she asks about the nature of existence. “Will we know up there? Or down here?”

Such questions contribute to the broader ideological contrast *To the Wonder* opens up between the physical and the spiritual. The settings in the

film—an ugly suburbia, a crowded Paris, a sterile supermarket, etc.—express an unsatisfactory or hollow modern earth. Neil, for example, visits poor neighborhoods, wading through dirt and water to collect toxin samples. His digging through gravel pits expresses material emptiness not unlike the colonists scraping through mud for gold in *The New World*. Material modes of life also reveal the attraction of sin, of transgressing against the Ideal. The scene depicting Marina's affair is the closest thing Malick has come to a carnal sex scene; his camera lingers on flesh as if to suggest the pull of physical debauchery. The tattoo on the torso of Marina's lover—a human skull caught in a spider's web—befits the spiritual fall brought on by her lapse into physical lust.

To the Wonder's quiet release (despite the presence of Affleck, Bardem, and McAdams) reflects the critical consensus that it is Malick's most difficult, frustrating film. Much of the backlash recalls familiar complaints of his work, namely that any semblance of plot or character get lost in Malick's evocative visuals and ruminative voice-overs. The film is constructed similarly to the contemporary segment of *The Tree of Life* where adult Jack wanders through his atomized workplace. In that sequence, words and faces remain indistinct; as viewers we struggle to orient ourselves to events or information. The incessantly moving camera, distorted lenses, rapid-paced editing, fragmentary voice-over (often questions, always in whispers), and very sparse dialogue stretch out over the entire film. *To the Wonder* never settles into the relatively stable narrative

represented by the childhood flashback in *The Tree of Life* where the nature/grace conflict is articulated clearly through the concrete example of the parents. Malick may have become too “Malick” for his own good in this new film, taking his signature aesthetic to the extreme at the expense of basic intelligibility.

The film carries forth Malick’s Emersonian impulse toward the search for more complete spiritual existences. For example, when we see Neil and Marina falling for each other at the start, the latter’s ever-present voice-over explains the spiritual uplift of such passion: “I fall into the flame. You brought me out of the shadows. You lifted me from the ground. We climbed the steps. To the wonder.” The “wonder” here is just one of Malick’s many neologisms for a higher spirituality. Characters in this latest film journey through the world and through their minds to locate “wonder,” a journey which mirrors Witt’s search for calm in *The Thin Red Line*, Pocahontas’ search for her spiritual origins in *The New World*, and characters’ searches for grace in *The Tree of Life*. *To the Wonder* tweaks Malick’s prior messages about transcendence in that he figures it more literally as an interpersonal relationship rather than an explicit spiritual or moral communion with nature. We obey the integrity of the self by loving others, either romantically or through compassion.

The film continues Malick’s fascination with love as a topic of philosophical inquiry. What began as basic questions about its origins in *The Thin Red Line* (Bell wonders: “Love—where does it come from?”) and then questions

about its magnetic power in *The New World* (Smith asks: “Love—shall we deny it when it visits us?”) became simple proclamations of its importance in *The Tree of Life* (“Unless you love, your life will flash by”). This is Malick’s first film centered explicitly on a modern love story, but its meditations on the limits and value of love clearly represent a culmination of his prior interests in the subject.

The World Exists For You

Just as Emerson viewed the material world as a temporary shell of appearances that distract rather than enlighten, Malick’s career has shown a similar penchant for the spiritual life of self-recovery. From his early work, where paradise in the form of physical location leads to disappointment or loss, Malick reveals in his later work visions of paradise found—but a paradise of the mind and soul. Reflecting on the filmmaker’s work in a 2012 *Film Quarterly* article, Sterritt observes: “More emphatically, in every new film he makes, his goal is to evoke the shining of the world with reverence and awe, showing that the way of mortal nature is a misleading, ultimately illusory detour from the abiding way of immortal grace.”¹³⁹ His romantic faith in the metaphysical and the integrity of the individual mind points the way to something higher, beyond the surface of our manifest lives.

Yet Malick’s recent films suggest the increasing difficulty of realizing idealized existences in our modern world. With *To the Wonder* and *The Tree of Life*, Malick’s focus on contemporary settings coincides with darker depictions of

life: the contemporary sequence in both films express reservations about achieving transcendence from earthly toils. Fragmentation, detachment, and cruelty seem to be creeping their way into Malick's worldview. Transcendence remains possible, but our modern world chains us more than ever to empty lives.

Malick's upcoming work will be instructive to see any new direction in his cinema. Three new films are slated for release in the next two years: *Knight of Cups*, starring Natalie Portman and Christian Bale, which reportedly chronicles a man's reaction to celebrity; an untitled project starring Ryan Gosling, Portman, and Bale, billed as a love triangle set in Austin, Texas' music scene; and *Voyage of Time* starring Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett, which is described as "an examination of the birth and death of the universe," a comically ambitious outline even for Malick. These wildly varied scopes—from a cozy love triangle to the lifespan of the universe—suggest Malick's persistent interest in both the everyday and the cosmic (and the relation of one to the other). One imagines that critics are poised to jump in and reevaluate his standing in American cinema based on these new projects.

But assuming these films wear the mark of their maker, they will carry on Malick's interest in the attempts to locate higher states of consciousness by cultivating "original relations to the universe." Rarely appealing to sentimentality, Malick's films are essentially positive about the human condition, intimating that grace and love triumph over evil. "In the end," Sterritt reminds us, [Malick's

films] reflect an optimistic belief...that the cosmos is ultimately harmonious, in the all-embracing realm of spirit if not the circumscribed one of materiality.”¹⁴⁰

The light that strikes Marina’s face at the end of *To the Wonder* suits Sterritt’s evaluation of Malick’s broader oeuvre: there are ways through the world even when the journey seems dark and desolate.

Emerson wrote in *Nature* that “Man is god in ruins,”¹⁴¹ referring to our fall from the integrity of the mind. He held out little faith that mainstream culture would fundamentally change its investment in materialism, but he did believe individuals could “[look] out from the darkness to glimmers of daylight where the sky and green hills promise freedom” from our earthly prisons.¹⁴² I submit this is what makes Malick’s films, however imperfect and maddening, interesting and worthwhile: in an increasingly rushed and superficial world, where the garish, material “now” propels western culture full speed into distraction and destruction, artists who give pause to the integrities of meaningful life are more valuable than ever. This spiritual journey need not involve strict adherence to a religion or God, but instead is contained within each person who is self-attuned to the graceful life. Holly’s brief but powerful stereopticon revelation in *Badlands*, the life-giving power of wheat fields in *Days of Heaven*, Witt’s transcendent death in *The Thin Red Line*, Pocahontas’ spiritual return to Mother Earth in *The New World*, the reminder of the power of grace in *The Tree of Life*, and the hopeful embrace of

love in *To the Wonder*—all these moments and all these films help us visualize avenues to higher realms of existence.

Emerson was highly critical of the mid-19th century America around him. He felt it his duty to help others cultivate individual spirituality divorced from conformity or dogmatic religion. For him, change at the personal level, soul to soul, was the only avenue for broader, large-scale reform within countries, cultures, and the world. Malick also questions our culture's material ways, and he too marches to the beat of his own drum while doing so. The two men are aligned through different mediums over wide expanses of time. He continues Emerson's plea for people to look within and without for the transcendent among all things using the language of film. As Michaels writes, Malick maintains the "conviction about the presence of 'another world' that can be projected on a large screen in a darkened auditorium."¹⁴³ We see the light indeed.

It is not surprising that complaints against Malick's films tend to echo contemporaneous complaints against Emerson's ideas: too vague, too flowery, too redundant, too idealistic. I find these easy objections to swallow considering the payoff to beleaguered souls in need of new perspectives. "So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes," writes Emerson at the end of *Nature*. "It shall answer the endless inquiry of the intellect,--What is truth? and of the affections,--What is good?... Every spirit builds itself a house, and beyond its house a world,

and beyond its world, a heaven. Know then that the world exists for you.”¹⁴⁴

Malick opens up that world. The cinema is richer for it.

Notes

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- ¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, in *The Spiritual Emerson*, ed. David Robinson (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 25.
- ² Geoff Andrew, *Directors A-Z: A Concise Guide to the Art of 250 Great Filmmakers* (London: Prion Books, 1999), 140, quoted in Hannah Patterson, *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 2.
- ³ Lloyd Michaels, *Terrence Malick* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 4.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ⁵ Emerson, *Nature*, in Robinson, 55.
- ⁶ Emerson, *Nature*, in Robinson, 23.
- ⁷ Richard Geldard, *The Spiritual Teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Great Barrington: Lindisfarne Books, 2001), 27.
- ⁸ Martin Woessner, "What is Heideggerean Cinema?: Film, Philosophy, and Cultural Mobility" *New German Critique* 38 no. 2 (2011): 7.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.
- ¹⁰ John Ryhm, "The Paradigmatic Shift in the Critical Reception of Terrence Malick's Badlands and the Emergence of a Heideggerean Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 27 no. 4 (2010).
- ¹¹ Woessner, 133.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 136.
- ¹³ Christopher Yates, "A Phenomenological Aesthetic of Cinematic Worlds," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 4, (2006): n. page, accessed October 1, 2011. <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=394&searchstr=Yates>
- ¹⁴ Ryhm, 257.
- ¹⁵ Woessner, 144.
- ¹⁶ "Terrence Malick—Mega Director's Rare Public Appearance," YouTube video, 1:24, posted by "TMZ," June 14, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_UraxfJFTJk.
- ¹⁷ Phillip Gura, *American Transcendentalism* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 7.
- ¹⁸ Emerson, *Nature*, in Robinson, 23.
- ¹⁹ Gura, 212, is quoting Emerson in "New England Reformers," in *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 3, *Essays, Second Series* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 149.
- ²⁰ Robinson, 2.
- ²¹ Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in Robinson, 88.
- ²² Robinson, 2.

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- ²³ Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in Robinson, 134.
- ²⁴ Robinson, 3.
- ²⁵ Geldard, 26.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 100.
- ²⁷ Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in Robinson, 141.
- ²⁸ Michaels, 5.
- ²⁹ Emerson, *Nature*, in Robinson, 25.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 26.
- ³¹ Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in Robinson, 136.
- ³² Geldard, 64.
- ³³ Gura, 103.
- ³⁴ John Orr, *Contemporary Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 162-187.
- ³⁵ Patterson, 2.
- ³⁶ Stewart Kendall, "The Tragic Indiscernibility of *Days of Heaven*," in *Terrence Malick: Film and Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Dean Tucker and Kendall (New York: Continuum, 2011), 154.
- ³⁷ Kent Jones, "Light Years," *Film Comment*, December 15, 2011
<http://www.filmcomment.com/entry/light-years-kent-jones-tree-of-life-review>.
- ³⁸ Ron Mottram, "All Things Shining: The Struggle for Wholeness, Redemption, and Transcendence in the Films of Terrence Malick," in Patterson, *Poetic Visions*, 13.
- ³⁹ Stacy Peeble Power, "The Other World of War: Terrence Malick's Adaptation of The Thin Red Line," in Patterson, *Poetic Visions*, 148-159.
- ⁴⁰ Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in Robinson, 133.
- ⁴¹ Emerson, *Nature*, in Robinson, 60.
- ⁴² Emerson, "Experience," in Robinson, 166.
- ⁴³ Caroline Zucker, "'God Don't Even Hear You,' or Paradise Lost: Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 29 no. 1 (2001): 2.
- ⁴⁴ Robert Zaller, "Raising the Seventies: The Early Films of Terrence Malick," *Boulevard* 15 no. 1-2 (1999): 154-155.
- ⁴⁵ Mottram, "All Things Shining," in Patterson, 17.
- ⁴⁶ Michaels, 30.
- ⁴⁷ Zaller, 142.
- ⁴⁸ Patterson, 28.
- ⁴⁹ Zaller, 144.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 142.
- ⁵¹ Michaels, 35.
- ⁵² Zaller, 142.
- ⁵³ Emerson, *Nature*, in Robinson, 25

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- ⁵⁴ Rybin, 37.
- ⁵⁵ Orr, 71.
- ⁵⁶ Emerson, *Nature*, in Robinson, 24-25.
- ⁵⁷ Geldard, 67.
- ⁵⁸ Michael Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 55.
- ⁵⁹ Morrison and Schur, 17.
- ⁶⁰ Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 102.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 110.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 112.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 110.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.
- ⁶⁵ Michaels, 33.
- ⁶⁶ Emerson, "Circles," in Robinson, 162.
- ⁶⁷ See "Vista," in Merriam-Webster Dictionary, online, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vista>.
- ⁶⁸ Michaels, 34.
- ⁶⁹ Zucker, 3.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ⁷¹ Kendell, 159.
- ⁷² Contrary to popular practice, Malick had his set designer, Jack Fisk, build an entire house for the shoot, rather than only an outer façade.
- ⁷³ Woessner, 146.
- ⁷⁴ Nestor Alemendros, *A Man with a Camera* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1984), 182.
- ⁷⁵ Orr, 175.
- ⁷⁶ Martin Donougho, "West of Eden: Terrence Malick's Days of Heaven" *Post Script* 5 no. 1 (1985): 25.
- ⁷⁷ Zucker, 7.
- ⁷⁸ Kozloff, 116.
- ⁷⁹ Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in Robinson, 134.
- ⁸⁰ Simon Critchley, "Calm—On Terrence Malick's The Thin Red Line," ed. David Davies, *The Thin Red Line: Philosophers on Film* (London: Routledge, 2009), 16.
- ⁸¹ Michaels, 6.
- ⁸² Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in Robinson, 134.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, 133.
- ⁸⁴ Michel Chion, *The Thin Red Line: BFI Modern Classics* (London, British Film Institute, 2004), 9-10.

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- ⁸⁵ Emerson, *Nature*, in Robinson, 24.
- ⁸⁶ Many arguments (Davies, Michaels, Power) have been undermined by confusing Train's voice with others'.
- ⁸⁷ Grant Hill. "Making the New World." *The New World*, DVD. Directed by Terrence Malick. Los Angeles, CA: New Line Home Entertainment, 2005.
- ⁸⁸ Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in Robinson, 134.
- ⁸⁹ See Robinson, 131.
- ⁹⁰ Chion, *The Thin Red Line*, 54.
- ⁹¹ Jimmie Cain, "'Writing in his Musical Key': Terrence Malick's Vision of The Thin Red Line," *Film Criticism* 25 no. 1 (2000): 2-24.
- ⁹² Emerson, *Nature*, in Robinson, 26.
- ⁹³ Michaels, 70.
- ⁹⁴ Michael Filippidis, "On Malick's Subjects," *Senses of Cinema* Issue 8 (2000): n. page.
- ⁹⁵ Power, 54.
- ⁹⁶ Donougho, 366.
- ⁹⁷ Gavin Smith, "Let There Be Light: The Thin Red Line," *Film Comment* 35 no. 1 (1999): n. page.
- ⁹⁸ Filippidis, n. page.
- ⁹⁹ Emerson, *Nature*, in Robinson, 54.
- ¹⁰⁰ Michaels, 84.
- ¹⁰¹ Michaels, 85.
- ¹⁰² David Sterritt, "The New World," in *Physical Evidence: Selected Film Criticism* ed. Kent Jones (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007): 105.
- ¹⁰³ The DVD put out by New Line Home Entertainment features a touched-up image of Smith in hand-to-hand combat with a native warrior in the water—a scene that doesn't exist and which misrepresents the nature of the film.
- ¹⁰⁴ 65mm, popularized during the 1950s, is a wider film stock than standard 35mm. It results in a crisper image and greater sense of depth within the frame. Paul Thomas Anderson's 2012 *The Master* was also shot on this gauge. See "The Master: Filmed in 65mm for Maximum Visual Impact."
- ¹⁰⁵ Michaels, 79.
- ¹⁰⁶ Sterritt, "The New World," 106.
- ¹⁰⁷ Rulan Tangen. "Making the New World." *The New World*, DVD. Directed by Terrence Malick. Los Angeles, CA: New Line Home Entertainment, 2005.
- ¹⁰⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁹ Michaels, 90.
- ¹¹⁰ David Sterritt, "Film, Philosophy, and Terrence Malick's 'The New World,'" *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52 no. 18 (2006): B12-B13.
- ¹¹¹ Emerson, *Nature*, in Robinson, 53.

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- ¹¹² Ibid., 26.
- ¹¹³ Michaels, 91.
- ¹¹⁴ Kent Jones, "The New World," *Film Comment* 44 no. 6 (2008): 26.
- ¹¹⁵ Michaels, 88.
- ¹¹⁶ Emerson, *Nature*, in Robinson, 62.
- ¹¹⁷ Michaels, 96.
- ¹¹⁸ Sterritt, "Film, Philosophy," B12.
- ¹¹⁹ Rybin, 171.
- ¹²⁰ Brent Plate, "Visualizing the Cosmos: Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* and Other Visions of Life in the Universe," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80 no. 2 (2012): 528.
- ¹²¹ David Sterritt, "Days of Heaven and Waco: Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*," *Film Quarterly* 65 no. 1 (2011).
- ¹²² Sterritt, "Days of Heaven and Waco," 55.
- ¹²³ Ibid., 55.
- ¹²⁴ Terrence Malick. *The Tree of Life*. Screenplay, First Draft. June 2007. Scribd. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/126837071/The-Tree-of-Life-script>
- ¹²⁵ Anthony Lane, "Time Trip," *The New Yorker* (New York, NY), May 30, 2011.
- ¹²⁶ Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in Robinson, 136.
- ¹²⁷ Jose-Luis Moctezuma, "American Transcendentalism and 'The Tree of Life,'" *Hydra Magazine* June 19, 2011, n. page.
- ¹²⁸ Malick, *Tree of Life* Screenplay, 9.
- ¹²⁹ Emerson, "Compensation," in Robinson, 115.
- ¹³⁰ Rybin, 172.
- ¹³¹ Emerson, "Compensation," in Robinson, 118.
- ¹³² Robinson, 110.
- ¹³³ Emerson, "Compensation," in Robinson, 117.
- ¹³⁴ Emerson, "Compensation," in Robinson, 117.
- ¹³⁵ Plate, 528
- ¹³⁶ Emerson, "Experience," in Robinson, 174.
- ¹³⁷ Robinson, 165.
- ¹³⁸ Emerson, *Nature*, in Robinson, 33.
- ¹³⁹ Sterritt, "Days of Heaven and Waco," 56.
- ¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 56.
- ¹⁴¹ Emerson, *Nature*, in Robinson, 59.
- ¹⁴² Geldard, 26.
- ¹⁴³ Michaels, 98.
- ¹⁴⁴ Emerson, *Nature*, in Robinson, 61.

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